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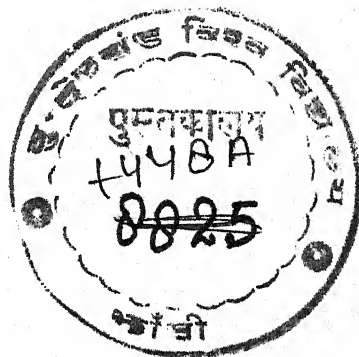
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ANITA DESAI : A CRITICAL STUDY

(A THESIS FOR Ph-D. Degree)



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1987

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**A Thesis in support of candidature for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Arts of the
Bundelkhand University, Jhansi**

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A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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P R E F A C E

To endeavour to understand a woman is the task of a brave man and to explore Anita Desai's woman within is the work of a life time. Working on Anita Desai has been a challenging though rewarding exercise in reaching the centre of the 'real' woman particularly in her mystic relationship with man in marriage. My approach in this research project, 'Anita Desai: A critical study' has been to 'reach' her largely through her fiction, critiques and contributions to various media rather than through scholarly critics and academicians who in their anxiety to "label" or "box," (to borrow an R.K. Narayan expression) a writer in strait-jacketed theories, tend to miss the chemistry of the creative process and the alchemist behind it. However, it is not my intention to belittle their sense of judgement and achievement.

According to Anita Desai writing requires "three demanding and unattractive conditions: silence, secrecy and cunning." While working on Desai, I have undergone through this patch much to the chagrin of my family and friends. Though it must be admitted that "silence, secrecy, cunning" as recommended by Desai have helped me a lot in understanding her work and characters. This understanding has cleared certain cobwebs associated unfairly with Anita Desai and her work. Contrary to widely-held view, Desai in her fiction has dealt with almost every stratum of society (Naya, Bim, Lila and Sarla come from different backgrounds of society), all ages of characters (Raka, Sarah, Sita, Nanda Kaul belong to different phases of life) and contemporary settings, city, small town and village milieu. Another image often added with Desai

is that her characters are hypersensitive and moreso. This view is only partly true. Her characters plunge "below the surface of things to discover and explore what lies submerged in the dark water below, then make that region a more brilliant, more lucid and more explicable reflection of the visible world." Desai reveals this truth in her "curious mingling of the real, and the remembered and the imagined - as every novel is."

The work on Anita Desai has taken me to areas as diverse as psychology, philosophy, an sociology and bio-sciences on one hand and the world of cinema, poetry, painting series and nature on the other. I am indebted to my friends and colleagues for the ready help they have provided me on this score. I am particularly grateful to Ms Suman Sharma for providing valuable perceptions on a woman's angle of looking at men, marriage and her milieu. Ms Rani Arora, Lecturer in psychology, was helpful in untying many psychological knots in Desai's fiction.

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(iv)

melt gloomy mood at
~~from a gloomy mood at~~ a crucial stage of my research work. My mother, though ignorant of the theme or the topic of the thesis, and my elder brother affectionately called Bhai ^{Saab} Saab, have given me sustenance during my trying days as a research scholar. Bhai Saab's constant prodding and his painstaking collection of cuttings from various papers and journals for my work have made this thesis a reality. To quote from Desai's 'Clear Light of Day,' Bhai Saab, like a tree, has been "deep in roots and generous in shade" not only to me but to the whole family and his large circle of friends and acquaintances.

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CHAPTER I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The Rise and Development of Indo-Anglian Fiction upto Anita Desai

About six years ago, Salman Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' appeared on the Indian literary scene. The novel was a major success. It won the prestigious Booker Prize for fiction. The novel may easily be termed as a trail-blazer in the sense that it brought about a remarkable transformation in the contours of Indo-Anglian fiction. According to Anita Desai the novel is "a giant that soars above all those flat little social documents, those child-like rural tales, those quasi-philosophical rambles that have made up the Indian fictional scene."¹ This novel proves that modern India continues to be a rich source of material, with its myths and legends and the language used in the streets, is capable of reproducing the mood and milieu of the Indian scene. Apart from Rushdie, Anita Desai is also responsible for providing Indo-Anglian fiction a distinct identity and stature.

This is a long way since the day (2 February 1835 to be precise) when Macaulay's highly controversial and far-reaching 'Minute' was passed. It envisaged to produce in India "a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect." Today, the wheel has turned a full circle. The leading Indo-Anglian writers at work today are "Indian in blood and colour" but not "English in taste, in opinion..." The flavour of Indo-Anglian writing is distinctly Indian.

The seeds of Indian writing in English were sown in the last few decades of the 18th Century when multi-faceted genius like Raja Ram Mohan Roy actively advocated English as the vehicle of change in India. It appears that his contribution in the planting of the exotic plant named English in the soil of India has not been adequately assessed. He was truly the architect of Indian modernism. It was he who persuaded the British Government to establish and promote a modern system of education to replace the traditional system. An English biographer of Roy records that "Raja Mohan stands in history as the living bridge over which India marches from her unmeasured past to her incalculable future."²

The Raja was responsible for creating the intellectual climate which nursed the genius of men like Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya. H.M. Williams in his book 'Indo - Anglian Literature' argues that "Raja Ram Mohan Roy's contribution to Indian life and to English literature was precisely as a spokesman of a harmonious interaction of Indian and European cultures."³

The Indo - Anglian literary scene throws up some pertinent questions about the medium and the message. Is an Indo - Anglian Writer leading an ^{insulated} ~~insulted~~ existence? Is Indian English a myth or a reality? These questions have been debated by distinguished academicians like K.R.S. Iyengar, B.B. Kachru and Meenakshi Mukherjee Or eminent Writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Anita Desai. To begin with, Indo - Anglian literature has not a long

English: Prospect and Retrospect' read at the Seminar On Indian English held at CIEEL, Hyderabad in July 1972 asserted confidently that Indo-Anglian literature is not only a distinctive literature but also a "link-literature in the context of India's pluralistic literary landscape." Prof. Iyengar is confident that Indo-Anglian literature has a distinct imprint of Indianness in the choice of subject and language. According to him English was a child of the illegitimate marriage between British presence and Indian sensibility. Mulk Raj Anand used a metaphor 'The changeling' to express his views on the use of English by an Indian Writer. Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee aptly calls Indo-Anglian fiction the 'twice-born fiction' in her book of the same title.

In recent years, Indian English has gained more respectability. Indian English fiction is now being studied, discussed and dissected in the English - Speaking world by those who are interested in India. This changed attitude towards Indian English is succinctly summed up by Prof. Iyengar when he declares, "Indian Writing in English is but one of the voices in which India speaks. It is a new voice, no doubt, but it is as much Indian as others."⁴

Indian English has enriched itself with the passage of time. Today, it is suitable to convey the Indian character and landscape. It has an ^{earthly} ~~earthly~~ gusto and verve. The English language may have had a refugee status in India; but when the British rules withdrew; it seemed ill at ease

amidst Indian politics, religious, mythology and dusty landscape. "But it taught itself the tricks of survival and we now find it suitably clad in 'Khadi', and eating chillies with the best of us."⁵ Today, Rushdie in 'Midnight's Children', Amitav Ghosh in 'The Circle of Reason', Vikram Seth in his 'The Golden Gate' and Anita Desai in 'In custody' use English in a masterly way.

It is a long way from the time when the first Indo-Anglian novel 'Rajmohan's Wife' by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee burst over the Indian literary scene in 1864. But soon Bankim Chandra switched over to Bengali for the rest of his literary career. His 'Rajmohan's Wife' had as much local colour as his other Bengali novels such as 'Durgeshnandini' and 'Anand Math' (1884). Sorabji wrote 'Love and its Life Behind the Purdah' in 1901 which was a poor literary effort. S.B. Banerjee's 'Tale of Bengali' (1910) also fell in the same slot. These two novels failed to create ripples in the fictional world.

The Indo-Anglian novel made slow progress in the nineteen -twenties. It gathered momentum gradually. In the next twenty years Indo-Anglian fiction took long strides and great names like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan appeared on the scene. This remarkable growth of Indo - Anglian novel is in sharp contrast to the meagre output produced until the year 1920. In fact, as Prof.Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, only six novels appeared before that year. These were besides Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's 'Raj Mohan's Wife' -

1. 'Kamla, a story of Hindu Life' by K.Satthinedhan(1894).
2. 'The Prince of Destiny' by Sarath Kumar Ghosh(1909).
3. 'Hindupore, A Peep behind the Indian unrest: An Anglo-Indian Romance' by S.N. Mitra (1909).
4. 'The Land of Kusuma, An Eastern Love Story' by Bal Krishan' (1910).
5. 'The Dive For @ Death: An Indian Romance by T.RamKrishan (1911).

In S.K. Ghosh's 'The Prince of Destiny and S.K.Mitra's 'Hindupore', an attempt was made to create historical novels, but the stories in both the novels were not based on real facts. A.S. Panchpakesa Ayyar wrote a series of historical novels beginning with 'Baladitya' in 1930. In 1933 Umarao Bahadur's 'The Unveiled Court' appeared. It was on the pattern of Mitra's 'Hindupore'.

As Gandhiji made his appearance on the Indian political scene, Indo - Anglian fiction found a new focus on the current issues, ideals and people in the forefront of several agitations. Politics dominated in those stormy days and even novels dealing with social problems bristled with politics. This marked the second phase in the development of Indo - Anglian fiction. Gandhi's tremendous influence on the masses kindled a new interest in rural India. Suddenly focus was on the countryside where majority of Indians live. Ven\katramani's 'Murugan, the Tiller' (1927) and 'Kandan, the Patriot' reflect a new trend in tune with the times. 'Murugan, the Tiller' was a major success because it presented the story

of rural India. Prof. Iyengar in his book 'Indian contribution to English Literature' praises the novel profusely. The story of the novel had a very human appeal that captured the hearts of many south Indian readers. The impact of Venkatraman's two novels was deep and widespread. The novels of the nineteen thirties written by Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao carry the influence of Venkatraman's novels. H.M. Williams in his book 'Indo-Anglian Literature' points out that Anand and Rao "find their themes, and a social justification for their art, in India in the throes of the Gandhian revolt which led to freedom in 1947"⁶

By the end of the World War-I, Indo-Anglian fiction was on a firm footing. A new wave of realism swept the novels of that period. The novel was used as a tool to popularise the cause of the nationalists and revolutionaries. The novelists at work in the post World War-I period were not blind to the issues agitating the English-speaking world.

The Indo - Anglian landscape underwent a significant change in the thirties. Many factors contributed to this upsurge in Indo - Anglian writing. The National Movement was in full swing. Gandhi's following was rising dramatically, ^{and} Nehru had a tremendous influence. In short, it was a sur-charged atmosphere. This period saw the emergence of some leading Indo - Anglian novelists for whom fiction was an end in itself and not a medium for conveying other kinds of truth. William Walsh calls Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, 'The Big Three' of Indo-Anglian

fiction. These three novelists gave Indian writing in English a big boost though they differed widely in their tone, form and style. Anand gave Indian novel in English a distinct edge and texture. He championed the cause of the down-trodden. Anand broke new ground in Indo-Anglian fiction by talking of social injustice in India. He unfolded a wealth of material for the potential writers. Anand's ^{hard} hard-hitting novels against the rich class laced with satire and broad humour brought Indo-Anglian fiction a certain prestige. Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura', published in 1938, was a literary landmark. Raja Rao, like Anand, was under the strong influence of Gandhiji and as such his hero was a village revolutionary and took part in anti-imperialistic activities. 'Kanthapura' highlights the "intensity of Indian life, its physical immediacy, its traditional swaddling and its religious murmurations."⁷ R.K. Narayan's novels deal with the middle-class. His superb way of telling a story with tongue-in-cheek humour makes him the leading name in Indo-Anglian writing. These three writers have enriched Indo-Anglian fiction with their different themes and techniques. William Walsh rightly concludes, "If Anand is the novelist as reformer and Narayan the novelist as moral analyst, Raja Rao is the novelist as ^{metaphysical} metaphysical poet."⁸ Broadly speaking, these three writers chalked out the area in which the Indian novel was to make its journey. They used an idiom which was free from the British burden. Their language is free from the foggy flavour of Britain and conveys the heat and light of the Indian milieu.

Mulk Raj Anand was a social realist who chose the novel as his medium to wage a war against poverty and class system in India. He was a trend-setter in Indo-Anglian fiction, His focus is on the distress of the lower castes and classes of India. His characters seeth with anger. They refuse to yield. Munoo, the Coolie, Bakha the untouchable, Bikhu the Chamar, Lal Singh of the trilogy — all share the common streak of non-conformity and strength of spirit.

Anand's first novel 'Untouchable' appeared in 1935. Highly rated by E.M. Forster, the novel presents Anand as a committed novelist. It exposes both the strength and limitations of Anand as a novelist. His next effort 'Coolie' (1936) established Anand as a social realist. In 'Coolie' Anand has a close look on the badly neglected sector of society. Munoo, the waif - hero, emerges as a spokesman of the typical poor and their place in static society. His third novel 'Two leaves and a Bud' (1937) is on the lines of 'Untouchable' and 'Coolie' as far as the theme of social protest is concerned. The locate is a tea-plantation owned by a Britisher. The novel is a record of Gangu's exploitation climaxing in a worker's revolt and Gangu's cruel murder by an English overseer. Here Anand paints a graphic picture of the life of plantation coolies. In this novel Anand seems to be influenced by D.H. Lawrence and E.M.Forster.

Anand's trilogy of Punjab life, 'The Village' (1939), 'Across the Black Waters' (1940) and 'The Sword and the Sickle' (1942) traces the life of a young Sikh Lalu Singh through different stages. In Lalu Singh, Anand introduces a new type of hero who is simple and exploited like his earlier heroes but wild, heroic and angry and a stubborn fighter for his honour. Lalu learns gradually. Now he is exploited by landowners, money lenders and the British. Anand's Lalu symbolises 'India's reaching out to a new life full of dignity, - respect and independence.

The second phase of Anand's literary career begins after Indian independence. 'The Big Heart' (1948) was the last in the series of novels of social protest. The novels written in the sixties 'The old Woman and the Cow' (1960) and 'The Road' (1961) do not stand out as great work. 'Seven Summers' (1951), 'Morning Face' (1968) and the recently published 'The Bubble' (1983) have a strong autobiographical streak. 'The Bubble' makes interesting reading. It is an autobiographical novel written in the epistolary form. It traces the life of a young Urdu poet, Krishan Chander who went to England in 1925 for a doctorate in Philosophy. The novel is a long treatise on the philosophy of living with detailed "discourses on poets and philosophers."

Mulk Raj Anand brings to his language an earthly gusto and verve that suitably convey the Indian atmosphere and conditions. For this contribution alone Anand's place in the

world of Indo - Anglian fiction is assured. He may be rightly called, in my view, the forerunner of Rushdie for the kind of language used so successfully in 'Midnight's Children.' Anand has made abundant use of literal translations of Punjabi and Urdu in the speech of his characters. He also makes use of mixture of Indian and English words such as "rolling ^{papads} ~~pages~~." He has been praised as well as criticised for the use of phrases like 'sating ^{sating} the air' or 'black in the pulse.' Anand, however, successfully captures the rhythm of colloquial ^{colloquial} Punjabi or Hindi. His devices may pose some difficulties to those not conversant with Punjabi, Hindi or Urdu, but never the less, it was a remarkable exercise in creativity. Anand's novels, particularly written before 1947, are documents of social protest and realism. They may be heavily loaded with a certain bias, still they make interesting reading. Mulk Raj Anand may lack the illustrational ability of R.K. ^{Narayan} Narayan and metaphysical aspect of Raja Rao, but he has a deep and genuine feeling for the have-nots, "a grasp of the social structure of his society and an extraordinary fluency of communication."

Raja Rao's literary journey begins with 'Kanthapura' in 1938. He is probably the most sophisticated and philosophically complex Indo - Anglian novelist. Raja Rao's life has swung between two cultures by sheer force of circumstances. He may have spent a major period of his life in France but his roots are in India and he is chained to this country. Raja Rao's works are essentially ^{ideological} ideological and display his devotion to 'Advaita Vedanta' or unqualified non-dualism. His second novel

'The Serpent and the Rope' (1960) won the Sahitya Akademi award. 'The Cat and Shakespeare' appeared in 1965. After eleven years came the novel 'Comrade Krillov.' Then came the 'Chessmaster and his Moves.' Besides these novels, two collections of short stories 'The Cow of the Barricades' and 'The Policeman and the Rose' have also appeared.

Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura' appeared when there was a lot of activity in Indo-Anglian fiction. Anand had already made his debut with the 'Untouchable.' ^{Narayan's} ~~Narayan's~~ first novel also appeared in the same period. These three giants of Indo-Anglian fiction completely changed the literary scene.

'Kanthapura' probes deep into the Indian life. The action takes place in a single village. "High on the Ghats it is, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar Coast." The story is told by a grandmother whose narration makes "racy and natural connections between the event of the fiction and the ancient myths." It tells how a remote village goes up into action under the impact of Gandhi and becomes the centre-piece of the 'Satyagraha' before it is crushed by the ruler's might. The novel has been written in the epic form because, according to Raja Rao, "The Indian Novel can only be epic in form and metaphysical in nature."⁹ In 'Kanthapura' Raja Rao uses an 'archaic and Biblical' language to create an atmosphere of village life. In his preface to 'Kanthapura' Raja Rao touches upon the tricky question of using English as his model of expression. He rightly states in

the preface! "We cannot write like the English, we should not, we can write only as Indians."¹⁰

"The Cow of the Barricades and other Stories" appeared in 1947. The narrative ~~str~~ strategy used in this collection shows the way Raja Rao was "experimenting in the direction which was to lead to the finished triumph of his mature novels." This collection reveals how Raja Rao used an old art form for the needs of the present. The collection is a significant milestone in Raja Rao's literary career.

"The Serpent and the Rope" is one of the major novels of Raja Rao. An Indian critic C.D. Narasimhaiah rates it as the finest of all Indian novels. Here the East-West theme finds "a depth and validity not achieved before in Indo-Anglian fiction." "The theme of this novel is complex. A Brahmin student Ramaswamy recounts introspectively his marriage to a French girl who is extremely sensitive, the death of their children, their aborted marriage and his return to India to seek spiritual salvation. In the novel, Raja Rao has portrayed the struggle of Ramaswamy who is in search of Vedanta. Raja Rao threw light on the philosophy behind the novel in an interview. According to him, "woman civilizes Man. That is what the whole book is about. It says that the feminine, which is the world, must dissolve into the absolute, which is the man, that is what the law is." ¹¹

In 'The Cat and Shakespeare' (1965), Raja Rao again explores Indian consciousness. 'Comrade Kirillov' lacks the range and scope of 'The Serpent and the Rope' and the metaphysical depth of 'The Cat and Shakespeare.'

Raja Rao's major thrust in his fiction has been to find roots through different ways. Raja Rao has attracted the criticism of Mulk Raj Anand. Anand accuses him of using the novel "to preach exhorting men and women to seek personal salvation through the Vedantic ideal." But Raja Rao finds his characters "as real to me as Narayan's characters." Some critics find lack of social concern in his novels. Raja Rao argues that social concern is an anathema to Hinduism and Hindu thought is individualistic.

Raja Rao is not a prolific writer but he has carved a place for himself in Indo-Anglian fiction. Lawrence Durrell considers 'The Serpent and the Rope' a work of our times" by which an age can measure itself ^{and} its value."

R.K. Narayan has been rated as the best and greatest Indian writer in English for long. Though he made his debut on the literary scene long back, his literary vision and skill has not dimmed with the passage of time. He is a compulsive writer who writes "primarily for myself or I would have no peace of mind." Narayan's forte is brilliant ^{illustration} ~~illustration~~ of human beings and human relationships. He does not claim to be a social reformer. His themes are genuinely Indian yet they have a universal appeal. Narayan's approach is one of supreme self-respect and cool self-assurance. He has a unique capacity to recapture the sounds and smells of an Indian small town. It has won him many readers here and abroad. He appears to "carry his home, his cosmos, on his back, as did the ageless swamis."

Narayan's literary journey started with 'Swami and Friends,' (1935). This work added the colourful locale of Malgudi to Indo-Anglian fiction. Here, Narayan portrays the life of a schoolboy, Swami in Malgudi in the nineteen twenties and thirties. He is raw in the domestic affairs. He faces problems at home as well as school. The end of the novel shows how he escapes death narrowly and is united with his family and life goes on merrily. In 'Swami and Friends', Narayan uses the same mix-up of social observation, a simple plot-line and extremely vivid story telling which mark his later works.

'The Bachelor of Arts' (1937) strengthened Narayan's position as a writer. Graham Greene provided an introduction of this novel. He was deeply impressed with the craft and memorable characters of Narayan. E.M. Forster found this novel "charming, unusual and amusing."

The hero of the novel Chandan belongs to an affluent family and is fondly over-protected by his orthodox parents. After earning a B.A. degree, he is passing his days listlessly when he experiences the bug of love. His passionate desire to marry the girl of his choice is dashed to ground when the two families fail to bring about their marriage. The girl is engaged elsewhere and the heart-broken Chandran leaves for Madras. He is disillusioned with the traditional Hindu pattern. In Madras he comes in contact with Kailas, a regular drunkard and brothel-visitor. Chandran is in low spirits and thinks in terms of suicide. On second

thoughts he decides to become a sanyasi. Here too he is disillusioned. In the end he returns to his parents, in Malgudi and settles down as a newspaper agent. In this routine life he finds a meaning and agrees to marry a girl he has never met. This novel reveals Narayan's gift of comic irony.

Narayan's next two novels 'The Dark Room' (1938) and 'The English Teacher' (1945) are somewhat different from 'The Bachelor of Arts.' 'The Dark Room' describes the tragedy of domestic life and for the first time the theme of modernisation is introduced in the smooth-flowing life of Malgudi. Savitri is a typical docile Hindu wife. Her husband Ramani is a successful manager of Englandia Insurance Company. He employs Shanta who is a divorcee. This 'other woman' disturbs the rhythm of married life of Ramanis. Savitri is enraged and leaves her family to lead a new life after an attempted suicide. At last she returns to her vain, selfish husband and children. Ramani, now - fed up with the tiresome mistress, is delighted.

In 'The English Teacher' (1945), Narayan shifts his focus to death as a shadow hovering over marital love. The novel describes the life of Krishnan who is a teacher of English. Tragedy strikes Krishnan when his wife Susila suddenly dies of typhoid. Krishnan brings up his daughter Leela. The story takes a mystic turn as the distraught husband seeks solace in spiritualism. A real mystical awareness

of the wife's spirit living on with the husband puts in shade his spiritualism. The husband begins believing in the Hindu idea of the all-pervasive unity. The husband decides to devote his life in service of others. The novel has traces of Narayan's personal experience as a widower at a rather young age.

'Mr. Sampath' (1949) came in the wake of independence. This novel is better known for some of the most lovable and memorable characters of his fictional world. The character of Mr. Sampath was inspired by "a real Mr. Sampat in Mysore, same name, same size, and shape." 'The Financial expert' (1952) was another work of Narayan. His 'Waiting for the Mahatma' dealt with Gandhi's 'Satyagraha' for the first time. The novel records the adventures of a young Satyagrahi, Sriram who fails to comprehend or accept Gandhi's ideas. Ironically, he plunges into the freedom movement out of love for an intelligent girl, Bharati, who is politically conscious and dedicated to the cause preached by Gandhi. But she is blind to any 'truths' other than those of the political cause she advocates. Sriram in sharp contrast to Bharati has his own wild passions including sexual desire for her and preference for violence. In 'Waiting for the Mahatma' Narayan's concern was not to build up the movement. It is unfair to condemn Narayan on this score.

'The Guide' appeared on the Indian literary scene in 1958. In 'The Guide' Narayan's characteristic qualities appear in full colours. The novel was "started and finished

in four months in Berkeley, California, while travelling in America on Rock feller grant."¹²

Raju is the central character in the novel. In this serious comedy the story is told in flashback as Raju relates his experiences as "ex-shopkeeper, ex-lover of Rosie, the married dancer, ex-gaolbird, ex-tourist guide " to Velan, of the villager of Mangala where people turn him into semi-god to invoke the rain god. Raju is terribly hungry and wants to escape from this predicament of fasting. Raju's experience as a ~~iron~~ tourist guide, how he helps Marco in his archaeological research, how he comes closer to Marco's glamorous but lonely wife, how he exploits the artistic potential of Rosie and launches her on a successful film career, and finally his sense of guilt in his relationship with Rosie when he forges her signature and finds himself in jail; all these episodes have been brilliantly executed by the master craftsman Narayan. In Raju, he has created one of the most colourful and memorable characters of his fictional world.

' The Guide' presents the eternal triangle in the form of Marco - Rosie - Raju relationship. Raju provides operation table on which Narayan conducts a surgical operation of Marco - Rosie's strained relationship in a cool, clinical way. It is unfair to brand Raju "a sinner, through and through and all along." Marco and Rosie stand on the two extremes of spectrum. "Society fascinates Rosie whereas Marco flourishes in solitude."¹³

Narayan's characters in 'The Guide' as in other novels and stories are partly real and partly imaginary. R.K. Narayan himself confessed this in an interview with 'India Today' (Feb.15, '82). "The character of Raju was based on an actual story of a drought in Mysore where it actually rained because of the prayers people sent up; the rest is of course fiction."

'The Man Eater of Malagudi' (1962) is modelled on the pattern of his earlier novel 'Mr. Sampath' and 'The Financial Expert.' The story is about one Vasu, a big ex-circus strongman, jail-bird, animal hunter who begins an onslaught on the wild life of Malgudi. He intends to make money by stuffing dead animals and sending them abroad for export.

'The Sweet Vendor' (1967) focuses on the father-son relationship in the changed circumstances. Jagan, the main character of the novel, experiences shock after shock. His inner turmoil comes to surface as he watches helplessly his son who has just returned from the States, his illegal marriage and other unlawful activities. Finally, Jagan gives a huge amount of money to his son and becomes a hermit. In this novel, Narayan "writes from deep within his culture." Narayan's "roots are in religion and in family."

Narayan's creative output is outstanding. 'A Tiger for Malgudi' (1983) shows that his literary reflexes are still sharp and his wit has not dimmed a bit with age. The

story is the autobiography of a tiger "nothing more and nothing less." The tiger talks of free days in the jungle and his food-hunting in the country side. Once he is trapped by Captain - The circus owner. His experiences of merciless training days, his running away from there and finally his physical and spiritual freedom by ^{his} Master who hands him over to the Zoo authorities are recounted vividly.

The aim of Narayan in the novel is that "deep within the core of personality is the same in spite of differing appearances and categories, and with the right approach you could expect the same response from a tiger as from any normal human being." (Introduction to 'A Tiger for Malgudi'). The novel is quite an achievement. Here, as a critic notes, Narayan "juggles with persons, animals and situations with the same understated mocking gentility that he brought to Raju and Rosie in 'The Guide.'"

Between 'Swami and Friends' (1935) and 'A Tiger for Malgudi' (1983) Narayan has produced an amazing number of novels, short stories and travelogue. He has been most consistent among all Indo-Anglian novelists since his literary career began in mid-thirties. R.K. Narayan's approach to writing is vastly different from his other contemporaries. He writes about what interests him, human beings and their relationships. He is not out to reform society.

Malgudi holds the centre stage of Narayan's writings. The action of most of his novels and stories takes place

here. Several conjectures have been made about this lovable town, which unfortunately is not to be found on any map. In his literary career spanning over 50 years, Narayan has been a faithful recorder of people, places and events which take place in the exotic surroundings of Malgudi. The topography of this mythical town is acutely mapped in the reader's mind.

Narayan's craftsmanship has been widely appreciated. His tales are simple and unadorned. But behind this facade of simplicity, there is Narayan's typical comedy laced with humour and irony. Narayan does not make you laugh nor does he make you ponder on the problems of life. He imparts an extra-dimension to things like trees, goats, knots of people, hawkers, faces, women with pots, and such common place things. These so-called trivia have a charm and meaning of their own in Narayan's writings. That is why Graham Greene called him the Chekhov of India.

Narayan does not take a documentary view of life. His writing is spontaneous. There is also "a nucleus of absolute truth in all my novels."..

The choice of a language for writing always poses a problem for a creative writer. Narayan uses what William Walsh calls "a pure and limpid English, easy and natural in its run and tone, but always an evolved and conscious medium." He beautifully adapts English to convey an Indian sensibility. Narayan has used the flexibility of English to communicate experiences. His language flows smoothly like a river. He displays an extraordinary skill in what Dr. Ramesh Mohan calls "creating consistency of character

and speech, by using the method of straight-forward translation of Indian expressions in English in his dialogues."11

R.K. Narayan's greatest achievement has been his endurance as a successful Indian writer in English and his total, life-long devotion to the art of fiction. Narayan has created some of the most memorable characters in his work. In recent years there has been a spate of academic work on his work including a recent study by Soviet ^{litterateurs} literatures. In January 1982, Narayan was given a singular honour when he was elected honorary member of the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters. Among the Big three, Narayan has been more consistent and prolific in his creative output and nobody is quite sure how Narayan manages it.

The end of the Second World War and advent of independence threw up a new crop of Indo-Anglian novelists. By this time, Anand, Rao and Narayan were well-established and in peak form of their creative activity. The new group of novelists touched upon the current themes as the fervour of nationalism was in the cooling process and there was a lot of bloodshed and violence in the wake of partition. The traumatic impact of just-finished war and partition provided sufficient raw material to the writers. The women novelists of Indian English also made their appearance on the literary scene in the '50s. They reflected the new mood of women in the brave new world that lay ahead. They shared the concerns and anxieties of the fair sex as the new socio-economic system unfolded in the new age.

The post-independence India saw more and more use of English by Indian writers to show their creative ability. The long presence of English in India had imparted it a peculiar Indian sensibility and now it was not uncommon for an Indian writer to convey Indian sensibility in English.

G.V. Desani's comic novel "All About Mr. Hatterr" appeared in 1948. It is strange and tragic that *ample* attention has not been paid to this extremely original and exuberant novel. It was a trail-blazer in many ways yet there were few takers when it was first published. A recent edition of this novel has received a well-deserved applause and attention.

The novel describes seven incidents in the life of Mr. H. Hatterr who had a mixed parentage. Hatterr is a funny character. His encounters with 'gurus' and women provide hilarious material. This novel is a significant landmark in Indian writing in English. Desani's achievement lies in the way he presents a living India in seriousness and comic exaggeration, in his special brand of English 'lingo'.

Sudhendra Nath Ghose, to a certain extent, reminds one of Desani. He uses the same combination of humour, grotesque, *kaleidoscopic* view of India's spiritualism, the Yoga and the ashrams. This ready mix-up is presented in the Mahabharata and the 'Panchtantra' pattern of narration. Ghosh, like Desani, captures India and her milieu with its intricate designs of sunshine and shade, change and motion and a certain restlessness.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's first two novels 'So Many Hungers' (1947) and 'He who rides a Tiger' (1954) present India's age-old poverty graphically, Bhattacharya unlike Narayan is a firm believer in taking up social issues and ills which plague society. He is a committed writer with a specific mission. He is not shy of his stance. According to him a novel must have a social mission. He has been rightly called a novelist of social change.

His first novel 'So Many Hungers' is a living document of the Bengal famine of 1943. The war, businessmen who trade in people's misery, violence and natural calamity mark this deeply disturbing novel. The main theme of the novel is hunger for food among the unfortunate people. Bhattacharya paints a picture where the poor die of starvation and the rich wallow in wealth. This picture is as true today as it was at the time when this novel was written.

Bhabani's 'He who rides a Tiger' has also the Bengal famine in the backdrop. Here he exposes the hollowness of religious practices used by the vested interests to exploit the religious credulity of the people. Karo, the key character, is driven by famine to earn his living as a pimp for a brothel. He is shocked when his own daughter is found there. Karo decides to take revenge on the social system by disguising as Mangal Adhikari. This change of mask does wonders. He is ^{mobbed} ~~robbed~~ by the rich who once despised him when he was poor. Karo has not forgotten his

days of poverty. He provides food to hungry mouths. Finally, Kare decides to peel off his mask and he and his daughter open a new chapter in their lives by turning their back on the corrupt people.

Bhattacharya's 'A Goddess named Gold' was published in 1960. Here again the focus is on the evil effects of poverty and profiteering. The novel is about Meera who is swaying between desire for gold and love of goodness.

Bhattacharya presents his women characters with a certain sympathy. Bhattacharya is a novelist with a vision for his country. All his novels reveal his deep concern for India and her future.

A few important novels have been written on the ~~rich~~ theme of partition in Indo-Anglian fiction. It is curious that Anand, Raja Rao and Naryan did not take up the partition theme in their novels though it was full of human interest and a lot of action and tragedy. The 1947 ^{holocaust} ~~hopeocaust~~ was a spin-off of the freedom movement. The partition theme has attracted Sikhs as well as non-Sikh writers (including a Muslim novelist Attia Hosain). Prominent novelists who have made extensive use of this theme include Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Balchandra Rajan, Attia Hosain, Raj Gill and Chaman Nahal. The novels of the last two writers have been published only during last twelve years or so.

'Train to Pakistan' published in 1956 is the first and probably the best novel on the theme of partition in Indo - Anglian fiction. The novel was "born out of a sense of guilt that I had done nothing to save the lives of innocent people and behaved like a Coward F."

'Train to Pakistan', originally entitled 'Mano Majra', describes the communal holocaust in the wake of partition. Singh graphically describes the life in the remote frontier village of Mano Majra as communal fire shattered the placid life of the village. Madness grips the Sikh population as news comes that a train full of dead bodies has arrived from Pakistan. The Sikhs bent upon taking revenge make a plan to ambush the train bound for Pakistan. Hukam Chand, the magistrate, learns of the plan but does not have sufficient police force to provide protection to ^{the} Muslims bound for Pakistan. In a swift move, he releases a Sikh 'budhush' Jugga with the information that his Muslim beloved, Nooran is on the train to be ambushed by the Sikhs. Jugga foils the local Sikhs' plan but in the process is killed himself.

'Train to Pakistan' is one of the best novels to appear in the fifties. According to Prof. Vasant A. ^{Shahane} Sahane the novel is a masterpiece. This realistic novel has "a well-thought-out structure, an artistically conceived plot, an absorbing narrative and imaginatively realized characters." 14

In 'Train to Pakistan', K. Singh breaks new ground in Indo-Anglian fiction by adopting a modern realistic tradition in fiction. He also adds to this a historical approach.

Khushwant Singh's second novel 'I shall not hear the Nightingale' published in 1959 was not a major success as compared to 'Train to Pakistan'. The novel does have a fine narrative structure and intense power. It makes a sound comment on the events related to recent history. The novel focuses on the family of a Sikh magistrate, Buta Singh. The action of the novel is supposed to take place in the period when a free India was a distinct reality on the horizon. Buta Singh wants to have the best of both the worlds but his applecart is upset by his son Sher Singh who "flirts with violence and death lured by the phallicgun."

B.C. Rajan's first novel 'The Dark Horse' (1952) takes up the familiar theme of meeting of the East and the West. The background is post-independence India. Krishnan is married to an ordinary Indian girl Kamla. Krishnan is educated in the West. A clash of two cultures takes place in the mind of Krishnan as he flirts with Cynthia. Kamla dies in the communal clashes and Krishnan finds himself in a Hamlet-like situation.

In 'The Dark Dancer' Rajan probes the causes of partition holocaust. Krishnan squarely blames the British

rulers for this colossal tragedy. But his wife Kamla who is a major character in the novel holds the people of the sub-continent equally responsible for this human tragedy. She defends Cynthia and her country. "It is not really in anything that you people did. You could not have brought it out if it was not in us" (P.74, The Dark Horse).

Attia Hosain's 'Sunlight on a Broken Column' (1961) is also a major novel on the theme of partition. In fact, it is the only novel by a woman (and that too a Muslim) on partition.

The novel, divided into four parts, describes twenty years in the life of Laila. This narrator-heroine graphically describes her growing in an affluent and cultured family in Lucknow in the first three parts. It is a momentous moment in the life of a country struggling to achieve her independence. The secular elements are involved in a battle with the communalists headed by the Muslim league. 'Politics has poisoned the atmosphere so much that even father and son take up the opposite positions in the family.

Part four of the novel reveals the effects of the partition on the members of a Muslim family far away from the spot where all the action took place. Laila's two cousins Salim and Kamal opt for Pakistan and India respectively. The partition tears the family fabric apart as the two brothers exchange arguments on the merits of their decisions.

Here it is that the partition poses several disturbing questions. How does one become an outsider in one's own native place? Where does one's sympathy lie: in family or country? Can loyalty be divided? These questions assume dark edges as none knows the likely pattern of relationship between India and Pakistan in the days to come. Salim and his wife leave for their new home and Laila poignantly reflects that "it was easier for them thereafter to visit the whole wide world than the home which had once been theirs."

A remarkable feature of Attia Hosain's novel is that she does not hesitate running down her own community for its role in demanding a separate nation. That is a bold stance by any standard. Dr. K.K. Sharma in his paper rightly points out:- "she condemns the Muslims 'introduction of religious fanaticism into politics..'"¹⁵

Manohar Malgonkar has also touched upon the partition theme. 'A Bend in the Ganges' published in 1964, is a major novel on this theme. Malgonkar presents in epic form India's struggle for freedom. E.M. Forster rated the novel as the best among all novels written in 1964. The novel has a close look on Gandhi's theory of Ahimsa and man's latent capacity for doing something violent. Debi Dayal's heroic mission to save his parents in Pakistan ends in tragedy. Debi Dayal's journey to Pakistan provides an opportunity to the novelist to present some poignant scenes of those days of bloodshed and violence. Malgonkar does not stand for

violence but asserts that violence is a grim reality. In this action-fitted novel, characters play a second fiddle. Events leave the characters breathless. Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly points out that the novel is not so much a story of men and women as of places and episodes, "not an integrated human drama, but an erratic national calendar."²⁶ ¹⁷

Manohar Malgonkar's creative energy was prolific in '60s as 'Distant Drum' (1960), 'Combat of Shadows' (1962) and 'The Princes' (1963) besides, 'A Band in the Ganges' appeared in rapid succession. Manohar Malgonkar was a major discovery of the sixties. He has a rich and varied experience of diverse people, places and professions. His roots go deep down in the Indian tradition and his canvas is large. Malgonkar's writings have an authentic ring as he draws heavily from ^{his} "the own living circumstances." In his first novel 'Distant Drum' he made ample use of his experiences in the army. His army background also looms large in the novels 'The Princes' and 'A Band in the Ganges.' His experience on a tea plantation was freely used in his novel 'Combat of shadows.'

Malgonkar is not much concerned with scientific naturalism or psychological realism which dominate modern fiction. On the other hand, his novels wage a relentless fight against what Dr. G.S. Amur describes, "the dominance of naturalism and realism. His concern is not so much with the average and democratic as with unusual and exceptional in human experience."¹³

Malgonkar uses the form and language derived from the western master-pieces for his novels. His main concern is to provide entertainment with his writings. Malgonkar is deeply impressed with Kipling, Conrad, Maugham and Forster. According to the Times Literary Supplement (June 4, 1964-p 491), "What he finds common to the novels of these writers is that they are well-constructed, are dramatic and they are not afraid of incident; above all they entertain."

Malgonkar and Khushwant Singh have much in common. Both are, what H.M. Williams calls, "writers of adventures, tales of heroes and outcasts embroiled in great events-war, partition, freedom struggle- that call for heroic action rather than words." 18 19

Malgonkar is a keen observer of the Indian scene and writes on and about it with authority. His knowledge of India's past and present, her people, her history and topography is superb. His contribution to Indian writing in English is tremendous. He has a very wide canvas. His themes are wide-ranging and have a stamp of authority. Apart from army and tea plantations, his novels touch the riots, the partition, the princes, the anti-social elements, the high society of a metropolis like Bombay and the tribals. Malgonkar writes from a ringside seat. His comments and observations are first-hand and sound and look genuine.

The fifties witnessed the emergence of women writers in Indian writing in English in a big way. ^{Kamala} Kamla Markandaya, Ruth P. Jhabvala and Nayantara Sehgal produced their first novels in this period. So far, Indo -Anglian fictional scene was rather an all-male affair though there were exceptions here and there. Markandaya, Jhabvala and Sehgal brought a wind of change in the literary landscape and provided a fresh insight into the status and attitude of women in society. There are certain areas of feminine sensibility which only a woman can successfully negotiate. These women novelists exhibited through their writings that it is to be a woman in this male-dominated society.

^{Kamala} Kamla Markandaya's first novel 'Nectar in a Sieve' (1954) brought her instant recognition. As a novelist living abroad and finding her locale and material in India, Markandaya has come under severe criticism. Some critics see her concern for social issues in India as a drag on her literary craft. ~~Not~~ Notwithstanding criticism, it is true that her concern is sincere with a view to arousing the conscience of every person towards improving the socio-economic and cultural traumas of the vast majority of Indians.

Her novels apart from 'Nectar in a Sieve' are: 'Some Inner Fury', 'A Silence of Desire', 'Possession', 'A handful of Rice, ^{Dams} coffer Dams', 'Nowhere-Man', 'Two Virgins' and 'The Golden Honey comb.' Her prolific literary output is remarkable. The modernity versus tradition is a recurring motif of her novels and challenges of existence in India provide a dark and disturbing background.

'Nectar in a Sieve' is the story of a farmer Nathan and his family viewed through the sensitive lens of his wife Rukmani. She is a remarkable woman of great strength and character, brave and unwavering in loyalty but extremely unsentimental. Nature and machines bring disaster to his family life. Nathan's children are brought up in poverty. Two sons leave India and one performs menial jobs. The only daughter's married life is on rocks and she adopts the oldest profession of the world. It is too much for Nathan. One day he dies and Rukmani goes back to her village with an adopted leper son.

In 'Nectar in a Sieve', Markandaya touches some sensitive issues in the Indian context. Ira, the simple, social, hard-working daughter of Nathan is turned out of her in-laws' house because she fails to bear a child. She sacrifices herself completely for the sake of her family. By starving for the sake of her brother first and selling her body later, she defies the moral code. In this context Dr. Meena Shrivadkar rightly comments,....."

"her silent sacrifice exemplifies the extent to which a girl could go to help the members of her family".¹⁰²⁰

Rukmani is another memorable character in the novel. She boils with anger against the male-dominated social set-up but suffers stoically as she has no power to change the pattern. She faces the natural calamities bravely.

'Nectar in a Sieve' is a significant novel which raises some vital and topical issue related directly to a woman's existence in India.

'Some Inner Fury' is Markandaya's second novel. Here the novelist explores the inner turmoil of a woman's heart through Mira. She falls in love with an English Officer, Richard. During ~~the~~ World War II the nationalist movement in India gathers momentum and the hot, passionate love affair ends on a tragic note. ^{Violence} Violence is in the air as ~~Mira's~~ Mira's brother is stabbed. Richardson is lynched by the mob. His torn shirt becomes somewhat like a relic for Mira who almost becomes distraught after her husband's death.

'A Silence of Desire' (1960) and 'Possession' (1963) also evoked considerable interest.

^{Kamala} Kamala Markandaya's works deal with fatalism and tragic things in the changing socio-economic and cultural scene of Indian life. But it would be misleading to call her vision tragic simply because she takes up the issues of social concern in her novels.

In spite of her strong social bias, Markandaya's novels lack a sound plot with sound structure. Some isolated pleasant phrases and real-life narration do not make a great work of art. Markandaya seems to be more interested in presenting her criticism of life than building-up of a sound plot and interplay of characters. In fact, sometimes her novels read like social documentation records.

There is some controversy on whether Jhabvala ~~an~~ should be included among Indo-Anglian novelists or not. Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her 'Twice Born Fiction' excludes Jhabvala for discussion but other critics and scholars of Indo-Anglian writing include her in their discussion of Indo-Anglian fiction. Jhabvala may not be an Indian by birth

but her novels have a distinct stamp of Indian sensibility.

Jhabvala began her literary journey with her first novel 'To whom she will' in 1955. Her major concern as a novelist has been to depict cultural collision of ^{the} East-West with the gentleness of wry comedy and the melancholy regret of true pathos. She also focuses on the middle-class life in India in the post - 1947 period. She views the unique family system of India with ample scope for plot, ~~showing~~ ^{scheming} and collision of generations through her western lens.

Jhabvala has been much misunderstood and run down by readers and critics in India just because she underlines the negative side of society in India. Nobody wants to hear unpleasant things about his other country and its people. Jhabvala has an ~~excellent~~ ability to observe, analyse, examine and portray the Indian scene dispassionately. Few writers of Indo-Anglian fiction can match her on this score. She dissects the Indian problems with the cool, clinical posture of a surgeon. Her tone is ironical but it rings with ~~sympathy~~ ^{sympathy}.

Jhabvala's first novel 'To whom she will' (1955) created a lot of controversy. According to some critics she failed to trace the real India in her novel. Her picture of India may be little closer to caricature but there is much truth in Jhabvala's books. Her characters have a distinct Indian imprint though it is true her characters tend to be overdrawn and exaggerated.

Her two novels 'The Nature of Passion' (1956) and 'Get Ready For Battle' (1962) find their source in the joint family. Lalaji - a crooked businessman in 'The Nature of

'Passion' is a remarkable character. This novel is an improvement on her first novel as far as technique and characterisation are concerned.

In 'Get Ready For Battle' (1962), Jhabvala portrays a strong-willed, unattractive middle-aged Indian woman crusading against her husband who has deserted her. She fights heroically for refugees and remains undaunted though her son follows the footprints of his father when she takes up the cause of prostitutes.

Jhabvala's 'The Householder' (1960) is slightly modelled on her first novel, 'To whom she will.' Here, too, Jhabvala's art of portraying characters comes out vividly. Prem, the hero gives his mother a pink satin blouse ^{piece} ~~piece~~ as a gift. She is pleasantly surprised. She strokes and touches it against her cheeks and says, "What is the use of bringing such a thing for an old woman like me?.. For your wife, you should bring..." (p-138). This is the moment which indicates that Prem is coming of age. Indu, his wife, has replaced his mother in his heart and the gift also symbolises how the mother becomes a kind of substitute for Indu who has gone to her parents' house. This is a delicate way of portraying character in fiction.

The landscape and the human geography of Jhabvala's Delhi as portrayed in her novels depicts the colossal social, cultural and economic changes in post-independence India. Jhabvala's Delhi is not a child of imagination like ^{Narayan's} ~~Narayan's~~ celebrated Malgudi, but it is very real, "a breathing and a living entity, a sort of vanity Fair of hard-working, self-seeking status conscious Punjabis who are part of that vast

social complex."⁴⁹²¹

James Joyce once said, "I must keep my mouth shut, stay aloof from the world and carry on ^{my} business like a thief in the night pillaging what I need and hoarding it in the secret recesses of my imagination to make of it what I can..." Jhabvala seems to be influenced in her writings by this statement of Joyce. Perhaps this is what she wanted to accomplish as a writer but her achievement as a novelist does not reach anywhere near Joyce's standing in the world of literature.

The third woman novelist to appear on Indo-Anglian fictional scene in the late fifties and sixties was Nayantara Sahgal. Ruth Jhabvala's novels focus on Indian social problems within the typical family ^{set-up} ~~setup~~ while ^{Kamala} ~~Kamala~~ Markandaya excels in underscoring the anguish in modern society, dominated by machines and fast speed. But Nayantara Sahgal's concern is the dissatisfied woman in high class society or city centres against the mercurial and colourful political landscape of India.

Sahgal's first novel 'A Time to be Happy' was published in 1958. It begins with Sanad Shivpal deciding to give up his comfortable job with a British firm. The narrator, a middle-aged bachelor, is mainly the recorder of events taking place in the lives of key characters in the novel.

The westernised Sanad's identity crisis is the focal point of the novel. The national movement colours the action of the novel. Sanad's first exposure to Indian ~~relaxx~~ reality comes when a clerk, Raghubir comes to the office with a Gandhi cap on his head. This exposure to grim reality throws

him in a situation where he feels stranger in his own country. Sanad's marriage with a College professor's daughter is an attempt to plug his alienation from Indian life. The Quit India movement claims the life of his wife's brother. This tragic death casts its long shadow on his married life. The novel ends on a note of happiness as we find Sanad getting a sense of belonging by learning Hindi and spinning Khadi. There are some loose ends in the novel which obstruct the flow of the narrative and bring confusion. The novel is not successful though it is an interesting social document showing the lives of highly educated upper class people.

Sahgal brings a new morality in Indo-Anglian fiction. According to her, a woman is not to be taken as a "sex object and glamour girl, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth, lulled into a passive role that requires no individual identity." ²² Sahgal stresses the need for individual freedom and it is no wonder her characters lead an intensely vibrant life. Her women characters in their relationships with their husbands and others become ^{lonely} lonely individuals who try to fight loneliness of life.

Nayantara Sahgal is a trail-blazer among Indo-Anglian novelists in her deep concern ^{for} and awareness of the Indian political scene. It is true there are novels which have a political background like K.A. Abbas's 'Inquilab', Markandeya's 'Some Inner Fury', Raja Rao's 'Kanthapura', Narayan's 'Waiting for the Mahatma' 'Asadi' by Chaman Mahal and a host of others which ^{were} written before Sahgal's arrival on the scene. Sahgal's uniqueness lies in her deep involvement in and commitment with Indian political scene throughout her literary career spanning over more than two decades. Starting with the brave new world of history when people dreamt of a new India, her novels explore

the disillusionment of the post-Nehru age. 'A Time to be Happy' (1958), 'This time of Morning', 'Storm in Chandigarh', 'A Day in Shadow', 'A situation in New Delhi,' all reflect Mrs. Sahgal's interest in and concern for the Indian politics,

Nayantara Sahgal, belonging to an illustrious political family, knows what she ^{is} talking about. She is a perceptive political ^{commentator} ~~commentative~~ in the national and international media. In her forays in Indo-Anglian fiction to write on political themes, she is not so much interested in sketching a literary landscape as a to make a statement on the contemporary political scene.

Sahgal's 'Rich Like us' is based on the 1975-77 phase of Indian politics. Though she won Sinclair prize for this novel in 1985, the novel remains more an exercise in dated journalism than being really remarkable from literary angle.

Nayantara Sahgal's latest novel 'Plans for Departure' is certainly a turning point in her literary career. The novel bears the authoritative stamp of Sahgal. It is a novel of ideas.

The backdrop of 'Plans for Departure' is 1914 and the locale is the mythical Himapur nestled in sylvan surroundings. The silence of the place is shattered by the distant thunder of bombings and the news of Khudiram's hanging. Sahgal does not delve deep into the real historical incidents. On the other hand Sahgal uses a subdued hint and report about an incident to spell out the period in the which the story is unfolding itself.

'Plans' is remarkable for its profusion of characters. Though the drama of the novel is somewhat played down by the characters and their interface among themselves and in ^{ideas} ~~discs~~ which flow from conversations, the loss is more than offset by the brilliant and gripping depiction of characters. Sahgal uses her subtle magic to weave characters. Anghat was like District magistrate Brewster; his wife Stella; missionary Martine Craft, Sir Nit in Bagu, the botanist, ^{and} Anna Hausen, a feminist from Denmark. She digs deep into the characters and removes the masks to capture the buried instincts. These revelations are expressed through Anna Hausen who is Sahgal's unconventional heroine of the novel.

Sahgal's 'Plans for Departure' apart from brilliant characterisation will be remembered for its cold wit and her keen eye for realistic detail. Sahgal is greatly helped in this task by her ringride view of history as she was born and grew up in politics.

In the preceding pages an attempt has been made to trace out the beginnings, growth and development of Indo-Anglian fiction upto Anita Desai's appearance on the literary horizon. After hesitant attempts during the early phase of British presence in India, Indian writing in English assumed a distinct shape when 'Narayan the Tiller' by K.S. Venkatramani made its appearance in 1927. Since then it has not looked back.

The nineteen thirties was the period when the national movement to achieve independence was gaining momentum. It is not surprising that Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao found in the movement raw material to weave their novels. Novels

written during this period were under some impact of the Gandhian movement and its allied aspects. Both Anand and Raja Rao sought their themes in the Indian context but they were also indebted to European and American novelists of the post-world War-I period, Raja Rao put before western readers "an idea, a metaphysic." That image about India still lingers in the west.

R.K.Narayan introduced the imaginary town Malgudi to Indo-Anglian fiction and through the portrayal of this picturesque town, its simple people who enjoy their every day life, ordinary events, created eminently readable novels. His literary output has been remarkable and has won him world-wide readers and honour. His keen observation of social scenes, ready humour and some memorable characters have enriched Indo-Anglian fiction considerably.

Independence brought with it the partition of India and subsequent violence and trauma. The partition theme also appears prominently in Indo-Anglian fiction.

Ruth Jhabvala made delicate and ironical studies of the social scene in India. The East-West theme also appears in many novels of Indo Anglian writers. Nayantara Sahgal made some political statements through her novels.

The women novelists who produced a remarkable literary output in the fifties revealed new awareness and changes subtly taking place in the personality of women. ^{Kamala} Kamla Markandeya and Nayantara Sahgal brought female characters to the centre-stage of Indo-Anglian fiction. They sought to project woman as an individual rather than an appendix to man.

These are some major currents and cross-currents of Indo - Anglian fiction upto 1963. That year saw the publication^{of} Anita Desai's 'cry, the Peacock'. This intensely disturbing novel heralded the arrival of a new sensibility on Indo - Anglian fictional scene. Her work and contribution to Indo - Anglian fiction is being discussed in detail in the following chapters.

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CHAPTER - II

THE MAKING OF THE NOVELIST

Anita Desai is a product of her times. Every novel of hers reveals in a subtle way the social forces at work at the time of ^{its} creation. Though she vehemently denies that she is concerned with social issues as such, her novels and stories tell a different tale. She does not take Mulk Raj Anand's stance on social issues agitating society. Through vivid and brilliant portrayal of her protagonists (who are, in most cases, women), she weaves the motif of social forces and their interplay with stark realities of life.

Anita Desai is a product of mixed parentage. Born in 1937 in Mussoorie - a picturesque hill-resort, her father was Bengali and mother German. This 'has brought two separate strands into my life. My roots are divided because of the Indian soil on which I grew and the European culture which I inherited from my mother. I realise I have a bridge between these two worlds.' This unique two-fold sensibility provides Desai's writing an objective touch. Her powerful observation penetrates the peculiar sensibility of this land. To her Indian sensibility Desai adds what one critic calls 'ambiguity' and a style which touches upon a wide spectrum of feelings and responses. - two traits she finds in European literature. In terms of painting, Desai paints sketches or paintings which have a European format but the colours used are Indian - rich, vibrant and full of

life. Her Indian sensibility is not something uncomfortable^m in the mind of the West.

A bookworm since her childhood, Anita Desai started writing when she was 'six or seven' (Her own words). This habit of reading books sowed the seeds of creative writing at a very early age. The result was obvious; birth of stories "which stretched and stretched and became novels on a small scale." Her wide-ranging reading is reflected in her works which have a lot of quotations from the holy book 'Gita' on the ^{one} hand and D.H. Lawrence on the other. Her childhood was spent in sprawling Civil Lines area of Old Delhi which incidentally serves as a backdrop of her brilliant novel 'Clear Light of Day.' She received her early education in St. Mary's convent where girls still came in 'purdah' and in curtained horse-drawn carriages. Anita Desai was ten when the Independence came ^{accompanied} followed by the bloody turmoil of the partition. This crucial and painful juncture in the history of India is vividly captured in Desai's 'Clear Light of Day,' "The city was in flames that summer. Every night fires lit up the horizon beyond the city walls so that the sky was luridly tinted with festive flames of orange and pink, and now and then a column of white smoke would rise and stand solid as an obelisk in the dark."²

The communal holocaust of 1947 brought about some remarkable changes in social values and pattern. As Anita

Desai puts it, "The mesh of Moghul and British influences which we had accepted without question as part of our childhood;... unrivalled.... and was replaced by something new and unfamiliar."³

Desai received her college education at Delhi's prestigious Miranda House. Those were carefree days - Desai enjoyed most. There was "much time and space we had, floating alone in a vast world so that one's imagination had space to grow and roam."⁴ Soon afterwards, her family shifted to Calcutta- the backdrop of her 'Voices in the city.' Here she met and married Ashvin. Since then she has travelled all over India - giving her a feel of the people and places and in the process enriching the texture of her writing which she took seriously with the publication of her first novel 'Cry, the Peacock' (1963).

Anita Desai is an introvert and reluctant to reveal any detail about her personal life beyond the cold bio-data that appears in several directories and works of reference. She devotes a lot of time to reading. Besides, she enjoys travelling, pottering around in her garden, classical music and painting.

These biographical details - though sketchy- provide signposts along which her literary journey meanders through pulls and pressures of social milieu around her. Desai's work is not a sermon or documentary on the contemporary social scene. She picks up that segment of the society- she knows best and provides it with a vision. As she *she*

observes:" I have never been interested in writing about typical families..... there has to be some kind of vision beyond observation. Situations must be such that you ' have not handed all the conclusions. Your imagination must be free to reach out..... my writing is from instinct rather than observation."5

Anita B Desai states that she is not much interested in social issues as such but as a writer she cannot escape society altogether. No man is or can be an island unto himself, however introverted he may be. A creative writer transmutes everything he receives from the environs around him. Anita Desai deals mostly with the inner life, compulsions and complexities of sensitive, intelligent women of upper middle-class because this is the class she knows best.

Anita Desai's relationship with society is a reality though it is not easy to define it. In Vinson's 'Contemporary Novel' she asserts that her "novels are no reflection of Indian society... "(p.348) but this only shows her anxiety not to be branded as a writer with a social banner. Even if she is taken on face value and is seen as an island unto herself, she is based in an ocean and through it is connected with other islands. Social forces around her influence her though imperceptively. Anita Desai is like an alchemist who distills social experience, highlights what she finds significant and sidetracks or skips altogether what she

finds less relevant. She is also able to look into the future with her gifts of instinct and insight. Kafka, almost a loner, looked in future and his works signalled in advance the horrors of Stalin and Hitler. Anita Desai's novels provide same signals on the issues related directly to women. The inner turmoil of Maya and Monisha, and Aunt Lila's views on the independence of women though figured in Desai's 'Cry, The Peacock' and 'Voices in the city' two decades back look a reality today. Desai burrows deep into social forces that condition a woman's growth in the male-dominated Indian family.

For a writer his work is like a facade behind which he conceals himself. But a keen observer by reading between the lines can capture the social forces which have shaped the writer's mind. Anita Desai in her literary career stretching over two decades has provided ample material through her fiction, review articles, lectures and a few interviews to give a discerning critic an idea about her use of English, creative process, style, views on women vis-à-vis fiction and influences on her writing.

An act of creation whether it be a painting, poem or a novel is a multi-layered process providing moments of utter despair as well as sheer joy. A writer works in a private world of his own. The creative process is not something like a public show; "to scrutinize it in the cold light of reason is to commit an act of violence and, possibly murder."6 Desai appears to follow James

Joyce's axiom - 'Silence, Exile and cunning' which means that an artist should keep his eyes open and mouth shut. What is the state in which creativity sees the light of the day? For R.K. Narayan, a real life situation or character can trigger off a novel or just an ordinary incident that starts a chain reaction. "It is never a clear or self-conscious decision." For a literary ~~genius~~ genius like E.M. Forster in a creative process" a man is taken out of himself. He lets down as it were a bucket into his sub-conscious, and draws up something which is normally beyond his reach. He mixes this thing with his normal experience, and out of the mixture he makes a work of art."⁷ Anita Desai builds up an atmosphere with its detailed sights, sounds and smells. "In a great deal of writing you start literally with actual scenes and end up on the metaphorical or symbolic level where every image and every word can be used in many ways."⁸ For Anita Desai a novel is a product of release of energy activated by her deeply felt tensions and compulsions. The mystic element in man-woman relationship particularly in the context of married life attracts her, unspoken thoughts of lonely, ^{sad} and women provoke her to write. According to Anita Desai a novel is not written just after reading a set of theories. A writer "follows flashes of individual vision and depends on a kind of ^{instinct} ~~instinct~~ that tells him what to follow and what to avoid, how to veer away from what would be destructive to his vision

It is these flashes of vision and a kind of trained instinct, that leads him - not any theories. "9 According to Anita Desai, writing " is a matter of instinct, silence and waiting." She employs the language of interior to build up narrative in her highly subjective novels. She points out the way her work comes to life, "Even when two characters meet, they use this particular type of language - the language of their thoughts, their interior selves- which has nothing to do with geography and can be written in any language. It has been my personal luck that my temperament and circumstances have combined to give me the shelter, privacy and solitude required for the writing of such novels."10 A writer makes a meaningful design out of image, symbol, myth and their interaction, 'Only connect' - that is what a writer's existence is all about - he connects, all the time.

Anita Desai's views on the use of English as a medium of expressing thoughts are thought-provoking. For Desai the decision to use English as a tool for her creative urge was not "a deliberate and conscious act." She does not think that it is impossible for an Indian writer to convey Indian thought in the English language whose seminal power "seems to lie in its flexibility, its suppleness, its marvellous resilience."11 Desai uses English deftly to sketch well-etched characters and create a typical Indian atmosphere though there are moments in writing which create hurdles in creating characters and

milieu that are basically Indian. This aspect of writing is illustrated by Desai in 'Contemporary English literature in India.' "It is difficult to write about that part of society that does not speak English, so you can only take those situations which you can fully express in English. For example, if something like caste system is brought into a novel all the time will be spent in explanations."¹² Anita Desai does not use "a borrowed sensibility" in her writings. Her mastery of English is superb and Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly comments that she is "a rare example of an Indo-Anglian writer who achieves that difficult task of bending the English language to her purpose without either a self-conscious attempt of sounding Indian or ~~an~~ seeking the anonymous elegance of public school English."¹³

Desai is a compulsive writer because she "would not be whole if I did not write." About a decade back, Desai's writing was "an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things." For Desai writing is a religion because it provides her personal satisfaction. It is writing which "makes life worthwhile or the existence would be meaningless."

For Anita Desai, as for any other creative artist, experience is the raw material used for weaving an artistic pattern. In an interview she commented, "We should have a pattern and then fit the characters, the setting and

scenes into it, each piece in keeping with the others and so form a balanced whole."¹⁴ Desai picks up a major situation and adorns it with "graceful rhythm and a poetic felicity." In a recent interview she threw light on her way of writing: "Nothing is real till I write it. It's an exploration of scenes I have seen of life flowing by. Through my writing, experiences crystalize and can be conveyed to others."¹⁵

Anita Desai is a voracious reader and as such cannot remain immune to influence of other writers on her work. Her creative sensibility has been enriched by these influences. According to her own admission she has been influenced by Dostoevsky, Proust, Chekhov, Henry James, Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence. She also reads a great deal of poetry - works by Rilke, Emily Dickinson, D.H. Lawrence, Rimbaud, Osip Mandelstam and Maria Tayestayeva, Roethke and Berryman. She also feels drawn to Japanese prose and poetry which "in terms of texture are very fine." Desai has a special liking for literary biography "as it takes one into the deepest depths of an artist's creativity, its well-springs and foundation." She reads only some of the best literature: "I don't waste time on inferior stuff. One naturally prefers authors who deal with the same subject, for whom you feel a sympathy... can understand." Anita Desai remains in touch with the latest being written in many parts of the world. Recently, she has been deeply impressed by the American writer

Flannery O' Connor's short stories and poems by poets like Roethke and Berryman. What strikes her is "the sense they convey of an interior world, a ^{Subterranean} ~~subterranean~~ world beneath the actual and everyday one."¹⁶ Among Indo-Anglian writers her pick is the celebrated Booker Prize winner Salman Rushdie whose 'Midnight's children' took the literary world by storm.

Notwithstanding influence of other writers on her work, Anita Desai breaks new ground in treatment of themes related to women. Her female characters strike the keynote of her work. In this male-dominated society her women characters react sensitively to the social forces around them. Their experience may be limited due to lack of exposure to the outside world but their intuition and insight are remarkable. As a women writer, Anita Desai shares this trait with them. In a revealing interview she threw light on this aspect of writing: "I do have more interest in insight, in intuition, which are feminine qualities - though male writers like Lawrence and James had them.... I write about sensitive people in an insensitive world..... and these are usually women... Women are more likely to be sensitive because of the way they have been conditioned. They have an inability to deal with the world in any other way."¹⁷.

In the following paragraphs an attempt has been made to interlink her creative sensibility with the social forces around her characters with a few illustrations from

her novels to establish how this interaction between creative sensibility and social milieu contributes to Desai's growth as a novelist.

The sixties witnessed great depression sweeping over the whole of India. The Indo-China War of 1962 had brought in its wake a sense of humiliation and shame in the country. Against this background of national disillusionment and depression emerged Anita Desai's maiden novel 'Cry, the Peacock.' (1963). I think Anita Desai must have had this experience of disillusionment in her subconscious mind when she wrote this deeply poignant novel. "Yes, it is his hardness - no, no, not hardness, but the distance he coldly keeps from me. His coldness, his coldness, and incessant talk of cups of tea and philosophy in order not to hear me talk and, ^{talking} taking reveal myself. It is that - my loneliness in this house." is 'Cry, the Peacock' portraying the sad and sensitive tale of Maya and her married life is a poetic statement of the institution of marriage.

The seeds of marital discord sprout in the first few pages of the novel. Anita Desai uses the death of Toto as a device to put into juxtaposition the divergent ways of Gautama and Maya. For instance, this reverie of Maya throws light on their married life: "Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers,

he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed.¹⁹ The next few lines of reverie reveal Gautama's indifferent attitude towards Maya.

In the closing pages of the novel Anita Desai shifts her focus to Maya's mother-in-law and sister-in-law who have come to look after Maya after the death of Gautama. The creative sensibility of Desai dissolves with social reality as she depicts Maya's trauma through the eyes of her mother-in-law and Nila. "They fell silent again, the younger women in discomfort, the older women out of tiredness.. They followed the threads of the past three days slowly having touched them often in the day already, and each time they stumbled upon the knots, the mysteries and above all, the enigma of the blithe, child-like serenity of the girl, Maya, who sat somewhere upstairs..."²⁰

The tragedy of Maya is a result of her disturbed and unhappy married life. The shadow of death follows her only when the gap between Maya and Gautama widens, and the 'psychic disintegration' sets in. Dr. Meena Bellisappa rightly comments: "It is against a background of frustrated married life that the haunting sense of ^{death} ~~Gautama~~ through different angles and in the process illustrates how Maya is a hapless victim of age-old, cruel traditions of society and her sensibility cannot be ignored anymore.

as her husband appears

her.²¹ Desai
the death of

In 'Voices in the city' (1965), too, there is a drift ^{towards} inner and external solitude. ^{Monisha -} ~~Monisha~~ a sensitive housewife in a middle class Bengali family, feels suffocated in the environment around her which deprives her of privacy. Monisha feels repelled as she overhears the women of her husband's family talking about her inability to bear a child.

"No, no, the doctor has said it is not the womb. It is these tubes, what'd you call them. Falloplan or Palloplan, what is it - they are blocked."

'Is it ? I heard once of a woman where ovaries -'

'An operation?

'The womb may be in the wrong position, then also an operation is required.'

'But it is the tubes, they are blocked.'²²

Such remarks are minor cruelties which are heaped upon childless women in Indian society. Naturally, Monisha prefers to keep her innermost thoughts to herself in such an established social set-up where a childless woman is treated like an untouchable. The joint-family pattern is at its worst as a watch is kept on her movements and her husband shows so sympathy for her. Finally, it is too much when Monisha is charged with theft and this humiliation pushes her to suicide.

Another dimension of social forces is reflected in the novel in the alleged illicit affair of middle-aged mother of Monisha, ^{Amla} ~~Anita~~ and Nirode, with Major Chadha. It has a damaging influence on Nirode as "between him and his mother's brilliant territory was erected a barbed wire fence, all glittering and vicious." 23

Anila remembers the relationship of her parents and the hollowness of the institution of marriage is shattered as they interact. "My father always got on her nerves by simply never doing anything. My mother was sitting with her head bowed and her eyes closed in pleasure. Then she opened them and glanced at him, and I saw that glance. I saw such terrible contempt and resentment in her eyes- just before she closed them again and lost herself in the music." 24

Aunt Lila, a ^{minor} ~~major~~ character in the novel, makes a profound comment on the status of women in society. "What is the difference?, she cried, "women place themselves in bondage to men, whether in marriage or out. All their joy and ambition is channelled, that way, while they go ^{parched} ~~parched~~ themselves." 25 Monisha does not complain when she has to cook and serve meal, get children of the joint-family ready for school. But as a sensitive woman she wishes "I were given some tasks I could do alone, in privacy" away from the aunts and uncles, cousins and nieces and nephews. Alone,

I could work better and I should feel more whole"²⁶ It is through passages like these that Anita Desai weaves a delicate and uneasy relationship between her protagonists' sensibility and the pull of social forces around them.

Desai's *Bye-Bye Black Bird* (1971) though a novel about immigration in Britain raises issues about the problems of adjustment and adaptability. Here Desai's protagonist is Sarah whose alienation in her own country is very different from that of Monisha or Nanda "because Sarah chooses it (alienation) deliberately; for all my other characters it is a part of their personality, their character. She chooses it by marrying a foreigner. She is an exile in her own land."²⁷

Sarah and her Indian husband Adit Sen dream about their own lives while sharing a bed. Adit is lost in his Calcutta home while Sarah plays a twin role of an Indian wife at home and an English woman at work. "In the centre she sat, feeling the waves rock her, and then the fear and the questioning began. Who was she- Mrs. Sen who had been married in a red and gold Benares brocade sari one burning, bronzed day ⁱⁿ in September, or Mrs. Sen, the Head's secretary, who sent out the bills and took in the cheques, kept order in the school and was known for her efficiency?"²⁸

Desai treats the alienation of Sarah from her parents as an attempt to gain an independent ^{existence} existence. When Adit, Dev and Sarah were holidaying at Sarah's parents' country-side residence, Adit tried to project himself "an exemplary affectionate, an attractive son-in-law forgetting that social realities in England differed from those of India. It never struck him that his marriage to Sarah might be due to her "silent, lonely perceptible drift, away from them towards an island independence."29

In 'Where Shall we go this summer? 'Anita Desai ^{treads} trades upon the loneliness of a middle-aged housewife whose husband is doing well in his business. Sita, Desai's protagonist in the novel, feels bored in the social set-up around her. In fact, "she never got used to anyone when they lived, in the first years of their married life, with his family. ... she had vibrated, throbbed in revolt against their sub-human placidity, Calmness and sluggishness."30 Sita feels repelled by violence and disaster, around her. Even her children's innocent activities and a photograph or the headlines in the paper are like "hand-grenades all, hurled at her trail gold fish bowl belly."31

Sita, an expectant mother seeks refuge in an island associated with her father and childhood memories. When Raman, her sensible but not very sensitive husband arrives on the island to fetch her and children, Sita wants to hear

from his mouth that he had come there to see her. When she realises that he had come because Menaka had called him, she feels let down.

In 'Fire on the Mountain.' (1977) Anita Desai ^{adroitly} ~~adroitly~~ focuses on Nanda Kaul's loneliness in a changed setting. Her great-grand-daughter Raka's arrival there was 'no more than a particularly dark and irksome spot on the hazy landscape - a mosquito, a cricket, or a grain of sand in the eye.' Ila Das, an acquaintance since her married days as the wife of a vice-Chancellor of a small town university also disturbs her self-chosen solitude. Through the interaction of these characters and shifting focus on ^{the} ~~past~~ ^{the} ~~present~~ Anita Desai weaves a social pattern which ^{the} ~~chases~~ them like a shadow.

Shrieks Nanda wants to run away from "all those years she had survived and borne... like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grandchildren, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her."³² As a wife and mother "in his house, never hers" society had overburdened her. Poignant strikes from the Canna beds in the garden, a wasp-strung child, children with "cut lips, bruised knees, broken teeth and tears" figured prominently in her chores as an efficient house wife and loving mother. Nanda, even in those days, felt stifled by crowding in "the old house, the full house,

of that period of her life, when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the hub of a small but intense and busy world..."³³ There was everything in those days except "a shortage of privacy that vexed her."

Raka "an intruder, an outsider" is more than a match to Nanda as far as escape and repulsion from society, in different ways, are concerned. Exposure to social realities makes Nanda what she is today but Raka was "a recluse by nature, by instinct."

Raka's sojourn^{at} Carignano has been possible because of her exposure to social realities in the form of estranged relationship of her parents. Raka has seen the drama and trauma of married life from close quarters. There was "her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse, harsh filthy abuse.... and her mother lay down on the floor and shut her eyes and wept."³⁴

In this powerful, evocative passage, Anita Desai brilliantly illustrates the social reality in the form of marriage and its impact on the feminine sensibility.

Ila Das is the third side of cruel social realities and their functioning in the inner and outer landscape of mind. Her interaction with Nanda in her past and present phase of life brings in sharp focus her relentless struggle for survival in this cruel society.

The death of her father and invalid condition of mother expose the double-standard attitude of society. Ila and her sister are deprived of the family wealth which was unjustly divided amongst their three brothers who were worthless and not a penny of it to either of the two sisters.

Crisis brings out the best in a man (specially woman). The Das sisters ran the family affairs as their brothers wasted their fortune on luxuries. They led a hard life as they queued up for buses and went to work. Ila Das ended up as a social welfare officer in an obscure village near the place where Nanda lived. Ila was a lecturer in the University for some time due to Nanda's husband. Ila's experiences as a welfare officer in a remote village are revealing. Her efforts to educate women about various social evils land her in trouble. Some powerful local vested interests obstruct her functions of job. It is difficult to teach a man anything though women are willing to try and change their tenor of life. Their husbands do not allow them to go along the path shown by Ila. The social pull of the village is too strong and Ila is cruelly raped and murdered on her way home after a visit to Carignano. The geria episode paints a dark picture of social forces represented by the local priest and his henchmen as they exist in the remote rural areas.

Anita Desai successfully brings out her characters' sensibility and social forces through the language of modern cinema. As a deft craftsman she focuses on biosphere of social realities and relates them with her protagonists' sensibility.

In 'Clear Light of Day' (1980) Anita Desai creates a picture of a family in a fast-changing social milieu, milieu. Characters and their interaction with other characters and within themselves and shifting situations bring forth social realities tantalisingly alive.

In Anita Desai's novels family background plays a significant role in shaping the sensibility of her characters and their journey from innocence to experience. In 'Clear Light of Day' the Das parents show little care and love for their children. In fact, they have no time for Bin, Raja, Tara and mentally retarded Baba. They, as children, had little access to the place where their parents spent their major portion of time. They "some-times folded themselves into the dusty curtains and stood keeping out wondering at this strange, all-absorbing occupation that kept their parents sucked down into the silent centre of a deep, shadowy vortex while they floated on the surface, skaling down into the under world, their eyes peeping with incomprehension." 35.

staring

Tara's sensibility is shattered when she finds her father leaning over her mother's arm and injecting a syringe into her arm. She fled "trembling, because she was sure she had seen her father kill her mother."³⁶ That small incident always haunted her. "All her life Tara ^{had} and experienced that fear - her father had killed her mother."³⁷

The ^{vacuum} emotional vacuum left by parents' neglect is filled by Aunt Mira's healing touch. The wide gap between Des family and Aunt Mira in social status is observed by children "by the way she was greeted by their mother and the way in which she returned the greeting, tremulously, gratefully."³⁸

A dark shadow hovers over marriage in almost all novels of Anita Desai. In 'Clear Light of Day' too, man-woman relationship wears a disturbed look though outwardly everything appears to be normal in some cases. Bin's parents are not a happy couple. They are seldom at home and naturally do not influence the lives of their children in any significant way. The father escapes the horror of his diabetic wife and a retarded child by playing bridge. On the surface, Tara-Bakul relationship appears a smooth affair but on close scrutiny we notice some cracks in their married life. Tara, a high-strung sensitive woman feels weak as she visits her childhood home in Delhi. She needed protection and Bakul offered it in ample measure

is to
His advice to her ~~to~~ be decisive. 'But no, the day you enter your old home, you are as weak-willed and helpless and defeatist as ever.'³⁹

The Misra family provides an excellent sociological study on the institution of marriage. Bim, herself unmarried, closely watches the happenings in the household and finds marriage almost in the ruins in all cases. The Misra brothers "never were any good and now they are grown men they are even more silly and idle and obese." Their wives came sometimes but returned soon in disgust and ^{disappointment} ~~disappointment~~. Desai through her protagonist, Bim points out the ^{cracks} ~~cracks~~ in marriage and their possible causes. "Women like change, you know," said Bim, "The wives wanted the new life, they wanted to be modern women. I think they wanted to move into their own separate homes, in New Delhi and cut their hair short and give card parties, or open boutiques or learn modelling. They can't stand on sort of old Delhi life, the way Misras vegetate here in the bosom of the family. So they spend as much time as they can away."⁴⁰

In sharp contrast, the Misra-sisters, Jaya and Sarla, lead pathetic and grinding life. Jaya and Sarla are actually separated from their husbands and marriage is only in name. Divorce is an ugly word in a middle class terminology and in the Misra family it is not used. The

husbands of Jaya and Sarla were too modern for them. "They played golf and danced and gave Cocktail parties. Imagine, poor Jaya and Sarla who only ever wanted to Knit them sweaters and make them pickles. They soon came home to Papa and Mama - were sent home, actually. For years they used to talk of going back to their husbands and make up reasons for not joining them where they were - they were in the army and the navy. I think which was convenient." 41

Anita Desai's sensibility scales new heights in its interaction with social reality of a widow's life in a Hindu family. In the portrayal of Aunt Mira and her pathetic lot, Desai has created a superb character. The dark recesses of a widow's life have seldom been explored with such sensitivity and sympathy in Indo-Anglian fiction.

Aunt Mira, a poor relation of Bin's mother was widowed in her teens just after marriage. She was treated in her husband's family "as ^{maid}aid of all work, growing shabbier and skinnier and seedier with the years." She was discarded there as a useless article.

Aunt Mira's ordeals as a widow are commentary on the role social forces play in shaping the sensibility of such a woman. Widowed at an early age, Aunt Mira was tortured mentally and physically for the misfortune she had brought on the family. She was held guilty and suffered a lot on account of this. She aged early as her hair turned grey.

That at least "saved her from being used by her brother-in-law who would have put the widow to a different use had she been more ^{appetizing} ~~appealing~~"⁴² Finally she was turned out. "Another household could find some use for her," Cracked pot, torn rag, picked bone."

Bin in 'Clear Light of Day' emerges as a strong-willed woman who takes on the challenges of life single-handed. Raja, once a hero, seeks escape from responsibilities of life by marrying the ~~plump~~ ^{Al} daughter of Hyder Ali, his idol of young days. Tara seeks solace in the security of Bakul's arms. It is Bin who shows her strength of character and spurns a sure-offer of marriage from Dr. Bis was in order to give support to Bawa.

Despite the knocks she receives from the betrayal of Raja and Tara's escape to a secure married life, death of parents^t and Mira Wasi, Bin is deeply rooted in social ties and towards the end of the novel is in a mood of forgiving and forgetting. Tender ties of family come to life in Desai's creative sensibility. Her love flows for all her brothers and sisters. She thinks they are part of her life. Anger and disappointment belonged to her as much as to them. She was willing to forgive them for all their faults.^v "She could hardly believe, at that moment, that she would live on after they did or they would continue after she had ended."⁴³ The Das family with all its absurdity becomes meaningful once the members of the household see themselves as part of a pattern.

Anita Desai once told an interviewer that she had to write about the society she knew. "If I were to write about the Indian peasant it would be forced and show an element of strain"⁴⁴ But her novel for children 'The Village by the Sea' (1982) faithfully records the countryside scene as it exists today.

The story deals with a family where two brave and enterprising children Lila, only thirteen and Hari only twelve, pull the family out of deep straits. They provide a glimmer of hope in an otherwise dismal environment. Their toddy-addicted father, ailing mother and two young sisters are grateful to them for their brave deeds in their own way.

The social forces around these two brave, lowly children provide an opportunity to Desai to unfold her creative sensibility. As Hari makes plan for going to Bombay, Lila realises that he is growing up. "She felt relieved now to think Hari was growing up and would soon be able to find work and earn money. .. change would not come suddenly or ^{quickly} to their home and family, but it would come."⁴⁵

Hari is deeply attached to his sisters. Poverty binds them together. His responsibility towards them is greater because as the only male child of the family he is to play a protective and pivotal role in the family context particularly so because their father is toddy-addict

and skirts his responsibilities as the head of the family. Hari is sensitive to the role he has to play in the family affairs. While in Bombay he looks at the scene in proper perspective. "He seldom thought about them (his sisters) or their lives, because they lived so close together in that small hut, sharing same kind of life. It was the hard life that occupied him entirely so that he could see them separated from it, as people, as individuals, Lila, Bela and Kamal. his three sisters, ^{one} older and two younger than him. Here they were, with nothing but a small smoking fire to light their hut or give them comfort while he was away."⁴⁶

Anita Desai looks at these girls and the problem of their ^{marriage} marriage in a sociological perspective. It is really a task to find husbands for girls in the face of growing demand for dowry. A single, working girl cannot think of living alone independently throughout her life. "What were they waiting for? What were they hoping for? They could never look forward to working in a fishing boat or in a factory, as he did. They would have to marry one day, and he would have to see it since his father would not. He would have to find them husbands, and buy them their wedding finery- silk saris and gold jewellery- and arrange their weddings to which the whole village would have to be invited. The bride grooms might demand a dowry- a bicycle or even a scooter. Gold buttons, coins and jewellery. A cow or a buffalo. A piece of land."⁴⁷

Social reality in the form of his sisters' marriage brings a change in the Hari's sensibility who is determined "to have a job ^{if} he was to find his sisters a way out of this dark, gloomy house and the illness and drunkenness, and hopelessness that surrounded them like the shadows of the night."⁴⁸

Hari's Bombay sojourn provides him a new perspective on social realities as they exist in a big city. The woes of marriages are also here in the form of Jagu's married life. His wife muses on this and appears to speak for all women of her lot: "Men can go to the toddy shop and drink and forget, but we can do nothing, so we must lie down and sleep and sleep."⁴⁹ Hari finds an identical pattern in the life of Jagu's wife and his (Hari's) own mother. "He knew what made her (Jagu's wife) speak in that bitter, sad tone. It was how Lila and he spoke to each other when they sat in their hut late at night, waiting for their father to come home from the village in the dark. Indeed, he felt as if this woman were speaking for him and for Lila and for their mother."⁵⁰

'In custody' (1984), her latest novel, is a departure from her earlier work. Here the focus is on Deven Sharma, an impoverished college lecturer of a small town near Delhi and his ^{dreams,} dreams, disappointments and disasters. Deven's lot is different from that of Desai's earlier women characters who are sensitive and overburdened.

Deven's wife Sarla thinks that marriage means "fan, phone, frigidaire." But her dream land crashes in junior staff quarters where life is shabby and loveless. 'In custody' focuses more on Deven and his frustrations and his married life remains in the background. Still, social forces, surrounding Sarla do tell a sad, silent story.

Deven's visit to his idol Nur to record his interview reveals sordid conditions around the seedy and dissolute poet and the world of his two wives. Deven is caught in the cross-fire of the women's attempts to outdo each other. Murad, Deven's friend and the editor of an Urdu magazine, is the epitome of exploitation covered in smooth talk. "Deven's plans to record Nur's interview and his poetry end in a tragic failure. But in the process, Anita Desai takes the readers to everyday realities of India and social forces that shape them. Desai's magnificent honesty in detailing the cruel, unromantic world where the shabby realities are juxtaposed with the beautiful unreal is the highlight of the novel.

Nur's second wife provides some significant comments on the "essential, unsuspected spirit of the women... free of its covering, all the ^{tinsel} and gauze... and reveal a face from which the paint and, powder had been washed." 51 She further shows traces of injustice towards women in this double-standard, male-dominated social set-up in her letter to Deven: "Was it not intolerable to you that a woman should

match their gifts and even outstrips them? Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement, while I, because I was born female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can in being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected?"⁵² In a passage like this, Anita Desai brilliantly captures the social scene as viewed through the eyes of a woman. Desai's creative sensibility is at her best in such passages which light many dark corners of social scene.

Anita Desai's literary career beginning from 'Cry, the Peacock' (1963) to 'In custody' (1984) has been a journey of a sensitive woman in an indifferent world. 'Cry, the Peacock' revealed dark shadows lurking behind married life. These shadows continued to lengthen and darken in ~~her subsequent~~ ^{her subsequent} work. But her 'clear light of Day' (1980) indicated the end of a long, dark tunnel. Her creative sensibility undergoes a radical transformation in this brilliant novel where social forces interplay with the elusive time "which destroys as well as preserves" 'The village by the sea' provides another signal that Desai's concern is getting wider in the context of social scene. She is not just satisfied with focusing her lenses on the inner landscape of her ~~female~~ female characters. 'In custody' further indicates that her creative sensibility is looking for a pattern in the interplay of social realities with the inner and external turmoil of an individual.

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CHAPTER - III

ANITA DESAI'S FICTIONAL ART

About twenty-four years ago, a new name and a novel appeared on Indo-English literary landscape and got rave reviews and a lot of ^{acclaim} ~~acclaim~~ and attention. The name was Anita Desai and the book, 'Cry, The Peacock.' In the Orwellian year, 1984, came 'In custody' an outstanding novel short-listed for the Booker Prize. In between she has produced a number of novels, short stories, articles and reviews. Today, she is considered as one of the finest writers in the land. Her work has undergone changes through the years she has been writing. Desai "wants each book to be different from the last, attempt something new in each one and never repeat myself."¹ A great artist changes all the time in his work though the change may not be perceptible to others.

Anita Desai has learnt a lot in her long literary journey. Her craft has undergone tremendous changes down the years. Today her art reveals maturity of thought and conception. Gone are the days when her maiden effort was branded as too descriptive and bogged ^{down} ~~down~~ in details. Desai's quiet writing bears a distinct imprint and is "more impressive than stylistic fireworks."

Anita Desai does not set much store by a word like plot because as she herself admits her writing has not been a deliberate effort. Writing for her is compulsive;

she writes by instinct, rather than by reason. This is one reason she prefers the terms 'pattern' and 'rhythm' as used in E.M. Forster's 'Aspects of the Novel.' Plot, according to Forster, is a "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on casualty." And in Desai's novels events and ^{Casualties} ~~casualties~~ ^{there} are many though her canvas may be limited. She highlights the plight of women trapped in the flux of time, Silence, sorrows and sufferings envelope her fictional world though there are subtle variations in characters' interior landscape and settings. The theme of her novels (excluding 'In custody') ~~is~~ in Anita Desai's own words has been "solitude, learning to live with oneself, with one's own conscience, one's own illusions and despairs."²

In Anita Desai's novels action is triggered off by a minor event. In 'Cry, The Peacock', it is the death of a pet dog, Toto. "All day the body lay rotting in sun." In 'Voices in the city', it is the departure of the train. In 'when shall we so this summer?' it is Moses's waiting. In 'Fire on the Mountain', Nanda Kaul is savouring the sylvan surroundings. In 'Clear light of Day,' "The koels began to call before daylight." In 'In custody,' the action starts as Deven "was buying cigarettes at the college canteen" and encountered his old friend Murad there. The beginning of the narrative is followed by its exposition in great details and finally the climax is achieved in the manner of "a storm gathering then breaking."

Though Anita Desai would like to disown 'Cry, The Peacock, (1963) Today because "it's absurdly callow and immature" and was" all written in one tone - a ^{monotone} monotone..."; the novels has germs of limpid, lyrical prose, sense of place and an intense sensibility which mark Desai's later work and place her among our best writers today. The novel has little by way of action. Movement takes place in swinging of time between past and present in the backstage of mind. Maya, a typical, hypersensitive protagonist of Desai is the key character in the novel. Her husband, Gautama, in sharp contrast, is cool, calculated and prosaic and practical. There is little by way of interaction between the two. The novel shuttles in ^{up} past and ^{up} present as Maya plunges deeper and deeper into trauma and turmoil. Descriptive details dot the novel as it advances towards its tragic end. Details are inexplicable in a novel of such nature because narrative has no physical movement so to say. If inspite of these limitations, she has managed to bring the novel "to a satisfactory, even explosive end," it speaks volumes of Desai's art.

Desai's second novel, 'Voices in the City' (1965) is a distinct improvement on her maiden effort as far as plot-construction is concerned. This novel, her bulkiest, ~~has~~ too, has little by way of action. Still the technique is different. The movement in the novel is projected through Hirode, Anla, Monisha (via her diary) and their mother. These characters live in their world of despair and dark

shadows and often seek refuge in the dark alleys of past. Amla among them sees light in the horizon in the beginning but the sordid reality of Dharma's dark, mysterious world throws her back in gloom. The novel is about a bohemian Nirode and his sisters; Monisha, who is married and Amla who is a working woman. In the background lurks the shadow of their mother ^{nestled} in the hills of Kalimpong. She is alleged to have romantic links with one Major Chadha and this illicit affair guides Nirode's journey to despair and disillusionment. Nirode's brother Arun makes his appearance in the first pages of novels and then disappears. As Desai's concern is to focus on failure and frustration of her protagonists, Arun as a successful man has no role to play in Desai's scheme of things. Monisha is caught in the vortex of a joint family where her privacy and solitude are intruded. She is driven finally to commit suicide. In fact, Monisha's tell-tale diary is the high point of this poignant novel. The novel ends on a tragic note as Monisha's dead body is taken out from her in-laws' house and her mother arrives from Kalimpong. She emerges as the binding force, "... She is everything we have been fighting against, you and Monisha and I, and she is also everything we have fought for. She is our consciousness and unconsciousness."⁴

The plot of Desai's third novel 'Bye-bye, Blackbird' (1971) also does not have many twists and turns. Here, the focus is on the lives of the coloured immigrants from India-the

blackbirds, and their struggle to find an identity in an alien land. The novel is a change from her first two novels in the sense that the atmosphere in the novel does not hang so heavily and there are patches of sunshine in between. The novel, somewhat documentary in tone and effect, is a long series of talks and talks mostly by Adit and Dev. The end does not come as a surprise and looks somewhat contrived as Adit leaves England with his English wife, Sarah, to find his roots in the native soil.

Anita Desai's grasp of her craft is more pronounced in her fourth novel, 'Where shall we go this summer?' (1975). The book is almost evenly divided in three parts. The three parts are fittingly titled as 'Monsoon 67', 'Winter '48' and 'Monsoon '67. They provide a kind of pattern and rhythm to the narrative. Sita, the key character of the novel, comes to the magic island Manori with her children Meneka and Karan. The busy Bombay life, where her husband Raman is based, infuriates her. Violence and seedy environments of Bombay make Sita almost sick. Sita is expecting a child for the fifth time and she wishes to ^{perpetuate} ~~perpetuate~~ her pregnancy. In the second part of the novel she goes back to the island to capture moments of her elusive ^{childhood.} ~~child.~~ She had an unusual childhood.... where she was "led to expect life to continue to be an extremely unusual, full of large, meaningful happenings"⁵ whereas life came to her as full of disasters and depression.

In fact, the theme of 'Where shall we go this summer?' is "the theme of rejection. In the final section of the novel Sita has to compromise because she has no other way. Sita's unusual predicament and her journey to childhood have been beautifully interwoven to make a brilliant piece of fiction.

Anita Desai adroitly uses the monsoon to depict Sita's inner turmoil. As she told an interviewer, "I wanted the book to follow the pattern of the monsoon together darkly and ~~tormentingly~~ ^{wildly} and passionately, then withdraw quietly and calmly."⁶

eaten 'Fire on the Mountain' (1977) finds Anita Desai at her best. Here the narrative is firmly in her grip and everything moves in a pattern to make an artistic whole. There are no loose ends in the novel and everything moves in the way the writer "had set out to do - not letting the book run away from me."

In style and structure, this novel runs somewhat on the lines of 'Where shall we go this summer?' Here the narrative is unfolded through three characters: Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. These characters touch certain vital aspects related to women. Nanda Kaul decides to spend her autumn of life in the solitude of high mountains. She wants to escape from the world of "bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries"⁷. Raka, her great-grand-child appears on the scene and there is a ripple in her world of silence and solitude. Raka, "a mosquito

flown up from the plains to tease and worry" is ^aborn loner and has a capacity, like a catalyst, ^{to} change things without changing herself. Ila Das provides an extra dimension to the novel by depicting the loneliness of a single, working woman in a remote area. Anita Desai weaves an artistic pattern out of essential loneliness of these characters and their background through interplay of past memories and present existence.

In 'Fire on the Mountain,' the setting Carignano remains constant but the memories of these memorable characters take the narrative back in time at different locales. Desai like a master craftsman makes the most of material at her disposal. The see-saw battle of silence and indifference unfolds different layers of loneliness. Anita Desai does not focus on one character all the time. She frequently changes her focus to reveal the inner recesses of loneliness of other characters. The end of the novel is superbly executed. "Down in the ravine, the flames spat and crackled around the dry wood and through the dry grass, and black smoke spiralled up over the mountain."⁸

'Fire on the Mountain' has deservedly won praise from critics. While Susan Hill finds the novel "beautifully accompanied," for Paul Scott it is "beautifully shaped." As far as Desai herself is concerned the novel "is the only book I have ever completed with a sense of satisfaction."⁹

'Clear Light of Day'(1980), Desai's sixth novel, was also short-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. This novel firmly places Desai among the front-rank writers of Indo-English fiction.

In this novel Desai paints the picture of a family, of a society which through her perfected technique of juxtaposing past and present, come alive. Deftly using the shifting perspectives of time, Desai creates a life-like story out of recurring images and incidents.

Tara's visit to her old childhood home in Delhi sparks off the narrative. Memories come flooding in and episodes-minor and major- disturb her immensely. Bin, the anchor of the Des family, is bitter and jealous in her recounting of the past. She has a grouse against everyone, Tara, Raja, her parents and in fact with her own fate.

Anita Desai focuses on the tensions of life in a society which is in flux. She skillfully uses time to reveal her perception of life in small details. Anita Desai described the novel 'four dimensional' where "time is used as a palpable element-like light, heat, sound."¹⁰

Two quotations given at the beginning of the book between themselves sum up the theme of the novel.'

Memory is ^a strange bell -

Jubilee and Knell--

--Emily Dickinson

See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as
it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

—T.S. Eliot.

'Clear Light of Day' is superbly structured. Its poetical beginning with the Koel's call sets the tone and pitch of the narrative. The novel ends with the song of the old master. These two ends provide a kind of interface between man and nature.

Desai's 'The Village by the Sea'(1982), won the 1982 Guardian award for children's fiction. In this book, Desai creates a vivid picture of how a village boy finds a job in Bombay and goes back to his area with plans for the future.

Desai's story-telling skill is ^{as} sharp as ever in this book. The novel conveys a child's perception of the world. Desai takes a close look at the village scene and its people, and their struggle and surroundings. Hari's slipping into adulthood by the thought of his three sisters, anaemic mother and today-addicted father has been beautifully portrayed. His flight to Bombay to seek a future, his struggle and new-born confidence there in, prepare him for the return journey with money in his pocket and skill in his hands. The novel is significant in the sense that it indicates 'Desai's reaching out and the hopeful note on which the story ends. Though her peculiar poetic sensibility is also present here, it does not take a too dismal view of the world and its affairs.

'In Custody' (1984) - Desai's latest novel, shows her literary career at its best. It is her second novel to be nominated for the Booker Prize in four years. 'In custody' is a departure from her earlier work in more than one way. Here her protagonist is not a high-strung lady of society who is sensitive, intelligent and strong in her own inimitable way. The novel is her effort to break away completely from her earlier writing. It studies human relationships at various levels. Here the focus is not as much on individual suffering as on relationships. 'The only real change in 'In custody' is the way these characters see each other instead of just themselves."¹¹

The novel has a strong narrative. The episodes and emotions flow smoothly like a river. Devan Sharma, an ineffective lecturer in an obscure college in north India has traces of Forster's Dr. Aziz in 'A Passage to India,' and Prem, a school teacher in Ruth Jhabvala's 'The Householder. His life is a paradox. He is a lecturer in Hindi but his childhood hero is Urdu's greatest poet Mir. Mureed, the shifty editor of an Urdu literary magazine ropes in Devan, his childhood friend, to interview the celebrated poet. This is a heaven-sent opportunity to Devan who seeks it as fulfilment of his dream. But some times reality is more strange than fiction. Devan's peep into Nur's "world of drama and revolving lights and feasts and furies"¹² makes him, awestruck. His emotional journey to his childhood

here comes to a grinding halt as he finds the seedy, dissolute Nur being insulted by his second wife Imtiaz Bibi. Desai brilliantly brings out the episodes between the old poet and his young, ambitious wife. Deven's first encounter with the old poet is a finely-crafted scene.

Deven's attempts to record Nur's poetry for posterity run into rough weather from the word go. His fiasco with the electronic tape-recorder is hilarious but pathetic. In between, Siddiqui, a Colleague of Deven, comes in and arranges funds from the college for the tape-recorder. A carton of cassettes piles up and it is a tough job to eliminate bazar noises, Nur's demand for rum and biryani from the recording. The end result is not a worthwhile exercise in recording a great poet's verse. Anita Desai has handled this ^{Scene} ~~poem~~ superbly. Deven's quota of disasters is not complete. He goes deeper and deeper into the vortex of Nur's world. The disillusioned Deven seeks solace in the philosophy, "We have no future, there is no future, there is only the past."

The concluding scene of the novel has a beauty of its own. It mixes disturbing tragedy with the shaping of Deven as a human being. The scene when Deven takes his son Manu for a walk near canal is an exercise in tender human relationship. "One brilliant feather of spring green fluttered down through the air and fell at their feet in the gray day."¹³

'In custody', a landmark in the literary career of Desai, is a rare mixture of touching pathos and black comedy and details describing realities of Indian life have been portrayed with great honesty. By all ^{standards} standards, the novel is an achievement though it may be a 'beginning' in Desai's view.

Anita Desai's forte in fiction writing is her brilliant portrayal of female characters though in her latest novel, 'In custody,' the portrayal of Deven is as life-like and memorable as that of Sim in 'Clear Light of Day.'

Desai writes about women because she understands them best. Right from Maya in 'Cry, the Peacock,' Desai's concern has been to focus on the dimly-lit inner, unexplored world of women. The major characters of her fiction are women and they exert the most impact on the readers. All the action, tragedy and high drama, start and finish with them. In portraying women characters, Desai exhibits exceptional skill and insight. She explores deep in the dark recesses of their minds and like a skilled painter provides them a definite colour scheme. Her women characters live a life of solitude and sufferings plagued with existential problems, desire for love, passion and hatred. Her women characters protect their privacy and resent any intrusion in their territory. It is not surprising her characters remain unresolved mystery even

at the end of the book. The movements of her characters on which she focuses her eyes are emotional and psychological.

The characters in Desai's novels appear to be drawn directly from real life experience though it is only a part of the whole exercise of character portrayal. As a sensitive novelist, her observation of faces and emotions is extraordinary. She never lifts a character from real-life in ditto. In fact her technique of creating characters is to assemble a collage of several images and impressions. As she herself says, "My characters are composites, they're hybrid really."¹⁴ Anita Desai picks up a germ of reality, coats it with her experiences and uses fantasy to make the character really memorable.

In the following ^{pages} ~~pages~~ an attempt has been made to study Desai's characters, protagonists and peripheral, and how she uses an amalgam of reality, her prism of imagination and her poetic sensibility for their creation.

Maya is the focal point of 'Cry, The Peacock.' Her despair and disappointments are directly linked with her sharp consciousness. Her childhood milieu has contributed a lot to her present predicament. The shadow-like protection of her father and feed of fantasies have left her a parasite who is unable to cope with the dark realities of life. Fear and pity dominate her adult world. Her sensibilities are covered with her baseless emotional fears. It is a pity "she never grows up, and never learns to live or to love; merely to destroy and depend..."¹⁵

Maya's husband Gautama, in contrast, is prosaic and practical. He is modern and reasonable and fails to understand Maya's dreams and expectations. An ^{uneasy} ~~uneasy~~, fragile relationship exists between the two and the tragic end of the book does not come as a surprise.

Anita Desai's second novel 'Voices in the city' is peopled by several characters. Though the major part of the novel revolves around Nirode and his bohemian life, the major character to develop strongly is that of Monisha. She as a silent, suffering woman in a middle-class Hindu joint-family ~~and~~ provides the main interest of the novel.

Monisha's character ~~filters~~ ^{fills} through her diary. She is projected as a distraught house-wife like Maya who tears herself to pieces in the sordid, cruel surroundings. Her relations with her husband Jiban are far from being happy "It is not there is my relationship with Jiban, which is ^{filled} ~~filled~~ only by loneliness....." ¹⁶

Monisha's gruesome suicide is an attempt to seek escape from the loneliness of married life and provides a touching commentary on the social ethos and loneliness which haunts a sensitive woman like Monisha.

Monisha's sister Anila's character falls in a different category. She does not share the stark pessimism of her sister and is ready to face the challenges

of Calcutta life bravely in the beginning. But her involvement with Dharma and subsequent ^{revelation} ~~revelation~~ about him also make her a victim of despondency.

Nirode, the bohemian artist-writer brother of Monisha and Ania, is used as a main prop to sustain the tragic theme of the story. Nirode is a rebel and rejects the world of security and comforts. He rejoices in failure and reminds one of a typical Kafka character. He sees Calcutta a symbol of disintegration. His mother's relationship with Major Chadha haunts him even in sleep. Monisha's tragic death brings his rebellion to a full circle and his facade of silence is broken. Nirode's nature undergoes a dramatic transformation as he has a desire to touch and feel and share the sorrows of others.

Several minor characters ^{through} the pages of 'Voices in the city,' Dharma and David have been given enough space to develop. Dharma is an enigmatic painter and David is described as "an unattached, drifting bird-creature" with a golden heart. Desai's minor characters provide a rich texture to the novel though the major statements on the theme are made by the central characters, Nirode, Monisha and Ania.

Anita Desai's 'Bye-Bye, Black bird' presents a gallery of characters which belong to many hues and diverse backgrounds. There is a colourful conglomeration

of Indian community in England represented by Adit, Dev, the burly Sikhs, the swami, the musician and his wife. The English side is represented ^{by} Adit's wife, Sarah, her parents and Mrs. Moffitt. The major movement of the story revolves round Adit, Dev and Sarah though it is Sarah who emerges as Desai's protagonist.

Adit is a typical 'blackbird' in an alien land. He feels drawn to England and her ways in the beginning but slowly and surely the process of alienation creeps in culminating in his decision to leave for his motherland. The sense of nostalgia is strong in Adit as he talks and talks of hilsa fish, 'charchari,' carrot halwa and the Puja days in Bengal. The arrival of Dev from India and the different set of ethos typified by Sarah and her parents deepen his urge to go back. Dev and Adit swap their positions. Both the characters talk and quarrel a lot. Though these male characters are vividly drawn, there is absence of depth and compassion which mark Desai's portrayal of her female protagonists.

It is the character of Sarah which overshadows the novel. She leads a twin-role - one that of an Indian's wife and other that of an efficient English working woman. Her character differs from ^{Maya} and Monisha in the sense that while Maya and Monisha have in-built silent suffering in their mental frame, Sarah's alienation is deliberate. She invites alienation by marrying Adit who represents a different culture." She is an exile in her own land." 17

Sarah is a complex character. Like other Desai's protagonists, she is sensitive, intelligent and introverted. Her suffering is all the more great because she has to juggle between two roles and in their absence she does not exist.

Anita Desai's exploration of a woman's mind and its dark alleys, continues in her next novel, 'where shall we go this summer?' Here her protagonist is Sita. She is strongly reminiscent of Desai's other powerful women characters. She belongs to the genre made up of high-strung, sensitive women facing private apocalypse in their middle age. Sita feels hurt and injured by the violence around her. For her people in society are like "animals, nothing but appetite and sex."¹⁸ She reacts to this situation by taking a strange and absurd decision of ~~relinquishing~~ prolonging her pregnancy. Her escape to Manori, the mythical island of her childhood ^{memories} ~~memories~~ - only heightens her sense of sorrow and loneliness. She feels 'tired, dishevelled and vacant.. like a player at the end of the performance.'¹⁹ Her husband and four growing children in their cosy flat fail to provide her soothing touch. Finally, she realises the futility of the absurd decision to prolong pregnancy and makes a compromise by returning to the family-fold in Bombay.

Raman is a typical male character of Desai. He is intelligent, practical and wordly-wise but lacks the sensitivity to peep into the injured innocence of his wife. Like Gautama of 'Cry, the Peacock,' he is not a misty-eyed idealist. He deals with life as a successful operator.".. life must be continued and all its business—Menaka's admission to medical college gained, wife led to hospital, new child safely brought forth, the children reared, the factory seen to, a salary earned, a salary spent."²⁰

Like ^{other} another fathers of Desai's novels, Sita's father too leads an enigmatic life. He operates smoothly and silently in the background. His influence is felt in the past actions and associations. Sita's father was different things to different people in his life time. People of Manori remember him as a father figure who had the magic and the healing touch. His married life remains enveloped in a mystery.

'Fire on the Mountain' has some memorable characters in the form of Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. Nanda Kaul, the widow of a university Vice-chancellor decides to spend her last years of life in the lap of nature where no one, nothing intrudes—she resents even the memories of her young days when she was at the helm of affairs in her busy, hospitable household. Like a typical Desai character she cherishes her privacy and solitude. Like Monisha in 'Voices in the city,' she wants an interlude of silence. Monisha was willing to do all household chore but she

wished." I were given some tasks I could do alone, in privacy."²¹ Nanda Kaul ^{echoes} the same desire by trying "to shut out sound by shutting out light."²² after a hectic schedule of household duties.

It is in this perspective that Nanda Kaul's decision to settle at Carignano is to be viewed. She wanted a complete break from the past.".. stillness and calm were all she wished to entertain."²³ Nanda Kaul's longing for silence is reinforced by Desai's brilliant use of images. Her obsession with silence is compared to "a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall."²⁴

Raka's arrival on the scene disturbs Nand Kaul's brilliant territory of stillness. Raka is more than a match to her great-grand mother as far as love for silence and solitude are concerned. She enjoys her solitude in the stillness of nature around Carignano. Unlike children of her age she is not bored in the loneliness of the surroundings. There is a bit of Desai in the character of Raka. "in her impressionability and the fantasy world she makes for herself to live in."²⁵

Raka enjoys adventure and aloofness. Her movements are sudden and mysterious." She was like a rabbit conjured up by a magician-drawn unwillingly out of the

magic hat, flashing past Nanda Kaul, then vanishing in the dark of a bagful of tricks."²⁶

Raka feels drawn by ^{one} destroyed house and ~~the~~ half-finished one with the force of a sea-current. Behind this strange fascination lies her parents's sad, unhappy married life - a recurring feature in Desai's novels. Nowonder "the ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli, drew her, the ravine where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks and agaves growing out of the dust and rubble. ... and the seared remains of the safe, cosy, civilized world in which Raka had no part and to which she owned no attachment."²⁷

In Ila Das, Desai creates another life-like character. She imparts a tragic dimension to the novel. She ^{invites} ~~invites~~ fun and ridicule by her grotesque figure and loud voice. As Nanda Kaul's friend during her young days, she serves as a foil to her experiences. She is working as a social worker in a remote area near Carignano. Her efforts to bring social reforms among ignorant, illiterate villagers fail miserably with her cruel assault and murder. Ila Das is modelled on one Miss R who was an acquaintance of Desai's mother and often came to visit her. Desai's childhood memory of that woman gave birth to this tragic and ^{unforgettable} ~~unforgettable~~ character of Ila Das. Desai provides a bit of history and biography to her images and imagination

and the result is one of the most memorable characters created in Indo - English fiction.

'Clear Light of Day' is a landmark in Dasgupta's literary odyssey. This novel, too, adds some memorable characters to Indo - Anglian fiction. The novel is about individual human nature and the relationships between people in a family. Bim, Tara and Aunt Mira have been brilliantly portrayed. Other characters like Raja, Baba, Bakul, Dr. Biswas, Bim's parents and the Mira family have also been sketched well. But the major attraction of this excellent novel is the characterisation of Bim and Mira Nani. 'Clear Light of Day' has some traces of an autobiographical novel. Baba is based on "a neighbour we had who used to play the same records endlessly."²⁸ Aunt Mira is "based on a neighbour in old Delhi, an English nurse who was very sweet to us children and who we later discovered used to drink secretly. She attempted suicide too."²⁹

Bim is the focal point of the novel. She is intelligent, independent and has a high sense of responsibility towards her family. She does not wallow in self-pity and past memories alone. She is the anchor of the Das family. She is the epitome of a modern working woman who has to struggle and sweat it out to keep the kitchen fire burning and has no time and inclination to think about her marriage or such other things. "I shall earn my own living and look after Mira Nani and Baba - and be independent."³⁰ Bim as a human being is not free from bitterness as she views Tara (oh, to going on -

to growing up-leaving-going away-into the world - something wider, freer - brighter" ³¹ and Raja (- "How can I enter his house - my landlord's house?" ³² - leave home for green pastures. But this anger and bitterness dissolves as she thinks in wider terms. "They were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them, so that the anger or the disappointment she felt in them was only the anger and disappointment she felt at herself." ³³

Some critics find in Tara traces of Desai. That is true to some extent only. Tara appears as a timid girl who in childhood used to say, "I will be a mother" and took shelter in Aunt Mira's arms. She escapes from reality the moment. She finds Bakul willing to marry her. Like a typical Desai character she is deeply sensitive and attached to her roots.

Aunt Mira's character ^{pulsates} ~~pulses~~ with life. As mentioned earlier, Aunt Mira was modelled on a neighbour of Desai in Delhi when she was a child. An unforgettable vignette of Aunt Mira is exhibited in the following passage after she had taken brandy and Dr. Biswas was to be called in:

"Together they tucked her out of sight - the little wisp of ^{pubic} ~~pubic~~ hair like a bedraggled rat's tail, the empty, slack pouches of her ancient breasts, the bits and scraps of her...." ³⁴

Anita Desai shows equal craftsmanship in sketching minor characters. There is Baba whose "hair was quite white, giving his young, fine face a ghostly look that made people start whenever he appeared."³⁵ Bakul as a smart, sophisticated diplomat comes alive in 'Clear Light of Day'. Raja's character has been juxtaposed with that of Bim - when they vibed well. The Misra brothers and their sisters Jaya and Sarla alongwith their father have been treated with compassion and a bit of satire.

Desai's 'The village by the sea' - as a novel for teenagers - does not project perceptions of adults. Still, Hari and Lila - the key figures - have been treated well with sympathy and compassion. Hari's growing awareness as ^a brother, though he is only 12, and who has to marry off his sisters is touching. The way Lila looks after the family after their mother's admission to hospital is a lesson in courage and determination.

'In Custody' marks a departure from Desai's earlier novels in the sense that her protagonist Deven and other major character Nur are men. Here Desai breaks a new ground and the women characters, so far central to her theme, remain peripheral in this novel. This novel highlights Deven's decreary life and how his escape flounders badly. Everybody befools him; Mured, the cunning childhood friend; Nur, the idol of childhood; Nur's two wives, the

electrical mechanic and even his students of the college. Deven evokes sympathy and laughter as he is trapped in one crisis or the other. Nur, the greatest Urdu ^{Urdu} poet has "slurred speech and sodden memory." Nur with his "^{filthy} abuse, rotten guns, raw liquor, too many years and too much impotent rage" is cleverly manipulated by his two wives, specially the second one, Murad, the editor of an Urdu literary journal, is initially responsible for bringing Deven's ruin. Siddiqui, as the inheritor of a van-quished villa, is a picture of cleverness and shows signs of homo-sexuality. Desai's women characters in this novel are Sarla, the sulky, sullen wife of Deven and two wives of Nur. Though these characters do not hold the center stage of the novel, they live their intense lives. Sarla's stony face, her sulks or her open jury" strongly ^{remind} one of ^{Countless} boundless poor middle-class housewives who live precariously and still, they dream of phone, fridge and television. ^{Imtiaz} Imtiaz Begum emerges surprisingly as a feminist in her letter to Deven: "was it not intolerable intolerable to you than a woman should match their (men's) gifts and even outstrip them?" 36

Anita Desai's protagonists in her novels, they are mainly female with the exception of 'In custody' have intense private lives of their own. They are educated, intelligent, fairly well-off financially and highly

^{sensitive}
~~sensitive~~ There is a gaping ^{vacuum} vacuum in their psychological and emotional make-up. They want to be loved with all sincerity but resent encroachment in their private world of silence, past memories and illusions. These features are brought prominently to the fore in the characters of Maya, Menisha, Sita and Nanda Kaul. But the character of Bin reveals a welcome departure from the general drift of her early characters. Bin too suffers ^{pangs} ~~pangs~~ of despair and disillusionment specially in context with her family. But she outgrows these human weaknesses as the narrative progresses. In 'In custody,' Desai has shifted her focus to a male character and has been fairly successful in bringing out the inner turmoil, high drama of Devan and paradoxes of life. Hopefully, characters in her forthcoming novels will be truly memorable and will bring out hitherto unexplored areas of mind in which both men and women.

In Anita Desai's novels, the place is as important as the principal characters. Whether it be the summer scene of Delhi in 'Cry, the Peacock,' 'Clear Light of Day' and 'In custody' or ^{hectic} ~~hottest~~ busy life of Calcutta in 'Voices in the city; or the violence and monsoon of Bombay life in 'Where shall we go this summer?' and 'The village by the sea; or the sylvan surroundings,' and snow-capped peaks of hills in 'Fire on the Mountain,' her description

of places has been truly remarkable. She picks up tiny things in a particular scene and gives it a life-like shape. In fact, environment and place are the canvas on which she paints her surrealist paintings in soft colours. For her they are of tremendous importance. "The visual images and sounds, smells and texture of the places I know are my material."³⁷

Anita Desai's first novel reveals her remarkable power of observation of people and places. Her extremely sensitive perceptions of sense capture the atmosphere of the place. The spring season's advent is heralded by the "silk-cotton trees... their huge, scarlet blooms, thick-petalled, solid podded..."³⁸ A cabaret is underway as "the music grew livelier, and she began to gyrate wildly in the centre of a ring formed by the other, some kind of macabre meretricious abandon entering into her movements."³⁹

The dust-storm in 'Cry, the Peacock' is raging in tune with Maya's inner turmoil. "it gave me a sensation of flying of being lifted off the earth and into the sunset, release from bondage, release from fate, from death and dreariness and unwanted dreams. Release and liberty. Ah, storm...."⁴⁰

In 'Voices in the city,' Calcutta is as important as its people. The metropolis emerges alive in all its ugliness, misery, traffic jams, the lake, China town, the maiden and talkative and agitated Bengalis with their love for poetry and 'rasgolla.' Monisha's diary throws light on the dark side of Calcutta, "a face, that broods over the ^{smouldering} smouldering fire, a dull, vacant, hopeless face.."41

Anita Desai is eminently successful in evoking atmosphere of Calcutta and its interaction with the characters and the fusion of the two makes a tremendous impact on the overall effect of the narrative.

'Bye, Bye, Blackbird' is a climb-down from the dark alleys of 'Voices in the city.' The novel at places reads like a documentary on Britain. Desai brings out twin-faced English life - one based in London and the other etched in its idyllic and romantic setting. Anita Desai's keen observation of the rural England is revealed in the episode when Adit, Dev and Sarah have a holiday there. 'A cottage with crimson roses, hedges and fields, a river and a bridge over it, are brought to life by Desai's brilliant use of details.

In 'where shall we go this summer?' Desai returns to Bombay and the mysterious island of Manori. She creates the atmosphere of Bombay with all its squalor and ugliness and Manori with its glorious monsoon.

'Fire on the Mountain' contains some most memorable scenes ever created in Indo-Anglian fiction. Whether it is the tranquillity of Carignano or its sylvan surroundings, Anita Desai presents the natural surroundings around Nanda Kaul in all its splendour. Anita Desai spent a part of her childhood in Kasauli. She visited the place again as an adult. The perception lent by time helped her create a work of atmospheric details.

Ramlal's brilliant way of describing places and events brings them alive. Anita Desai picks up a burnt hut on top of the hill and rebuilds it through Ram Lal's sharp observation. "Hut? It was a beautiful cottage. An English Man lived there. It was burnt down in a forest fire and she went mad and was taken to the lunatic asylum with her arms and legs tied with rope. They say all her hair was burnt off, even her eye lashes, when she went in to save her cat. The watchman says he can still hear the cat howling in the ruins at night."⁴²

A vivid and eye-catching view of black-faced 'langurs' and their antics in a cluster of trees is evoked twice in the novel to provide local colour. "Suddenly every ^{tree} ~~grass~~ was full of them - their whip tails and jewel eyes, their mask faces and spider arms, black and grey and silver. They swung from the branches of the pines to the sprickets and from there to

the roof and sprinted across the corrugated iron-sheets... they tore leaves off the apple trees in search of fruit, plucked by hydrangeas to bits, dashed into the kitchen and grabbed at potatoes, baring their teeth and glibbering at whoever came in their way...⁴³

The summer scene forms an integral part of Dasai's novels. Here, Ila Das has pleasant memories of that period when Nanda Kaul was at the helm of affairs as the V.C.'s wife." And after the heat of the day, the lovely evenings out on the freshly watered lawn."⁴⁴

In 'Clear light of Day' Anita Dasai returns to the old Delhi as it was in and around 1947. The house, garden, road, river, society and old world charm capture the mood and milieu of that period.

Tara revisits her childhood home in Delhi and the old memories come rushing in. Meanwhile, the milieu of the house is described in a few rhythmic words: "Bright morning sounds of activity came from them - a water tap running, a child crying, a cock crowing, a bicycle bell ringing..."⁴⁵ Anita Dasai recaptures the scene of communal riots as they engulfed Delhi that summer. Gandhi's cold, cruel assassination shook the whole nation and Bim and Raja "spent the evening listening to the news broadcasts, heard Nehru weep, reduced to silence and shivering, then to irritation by the mournful dirges that were being sung continuously, sat together worried and relieved, shocked and thoughtful."⁴⁶

The scene when Baba tried to make his way by the river bank has been breathtakingly captured by Desai:-

"out of that lunar stillness a man loomed up, militancy in a khaki uniform and towering scarlet turban and roughly pushed past him shouting 'Hato', 'Hato' to make way for a white horse that plunged up out of the dunes and galloped past Baba, crouching his knees in the sand, the terror of the horse hooves beating through his head, the sand, flying back into his face and the voice still commanding 'Hato' 'Hato'." 47

The inevitable dust storm also frequents 'Clear Light of Day.' As Bin was correcting papers the dust storm struck: "All the doors were shut against the dust storm raging outside so that they could only hear the sand and gravel scraping past the walls and window-panes but not see." 48

'The village by the Sea' evokes the Indian scene brilliantly. The busy Bombay, its monsoon, sands and surf and the village scene with all its simplicity and colour have been painted by Desai in this novel. The scenes just before the monsoon's arrival and after the arrival in Bombay have been vividly painted. "The whole sea was in turmoil, great black waves rearing out of it and storming towards the shore, there were no clouds in the sky yet, but the sea seemed to know they were on the way, and was rushing forwards ^{and} upwards to meet them." 49 And after the monsoon had hit Bombay, "The city was washed clear not only of a year's dirt but also of the summer's heat,

and the sudden dramatic drop in temperature gave everyone a lift: it was like a picnic, or a holiday."⁵⁰

In 'In custody,' Anita Desai spreads her net of narrative to two places. Deven's job is at ^{Mirpore} Mirpore and his childhood idol Nur lives in Delhi. Both the locales have been beautifully created. The scene around a mosque in Mirpore & with "the shacks, sign-boards, stalls, booths, rags, banners, debris and homeless poor..."⁵¹ has been ^{realistically} realistically sketched. The place where Nur lives had "these louts, these 'lafangas' of the bazar world - shopkeepers, clerks, bookies and unemployed ^{parasites} ~~people~~"⁵² The scene when the second wife of Nur, Intiaz Begum performs has been created with remarkable skill. "Some-one bought a silver box of betel nuts and leaves-the smile Intiaz Begum gave was as sudden and swift as if scissors had cut through her face, snip-snap and the teeth were strained besides."⁵³ The scene describing the annual meeting in the college has been brought out brilliantly. The ^{ineptness} ~~kindness~~ of Chiku, the electrical mechanic in operating the tape-recorder is a scene of hilarious comedy. The scene near the canal where Deven takes his son Manu for a walk is touching.

Anita Desai has a distinct style of her own. Her ^{Her} intense sensibility, the way she looks at emotions and events and weaves them in an artistic pattern are entirely different from other Indo - English fiction writers.

Desai lays great stress on style in her work. By style, she means, a deliberate effort of putting "language and symbol, word and ^{rhythm} ~~sythm~~" together. An artist must also devise "a way to unite the inner and outer rhythms, to obtain a certain integrity and to impose order out of Chaos."⁵⁴ Desai has lived true to her words in all her novels. Her novels are a colourful mosaic of characters and places created in sharp and powerful images, superb narrative technique and a lyrical, lucid prose.

Nostalgia for past memories haunts Desai's major women characters. She ^{adroitly} uses this as a narrative technique in her novels. In 'Cry, the Peacock' Maya lives in memories and wants to extend her childhood phase and refuses to 'grow' emotionally. Through constant shifting of past memories and present predicament, she knits a design. The pet dog's death and albino's gloomy prediction, Gautama's practical approach and her father's faith in fate, her visits to the hills and the present loneliness put in juxtaposition the past and the present of Maya and reveal her trauma and turmoil.

In 'Voices in the city' too, the past and the present dominate the narrative. Nirode, the bohemian artist is haunted by the past memories. The reading of his mother's letter is like "sinking his teeth through a sweet mulberry, to bite into a caterpillar's entrails."⁵⁵

Monisha's predicament of her present life is projected through her diary. She compares her immediate past, when her husband was posted away from Calcutta, with her dark present when she has to live in the joint, family. The and identity crisis of Desai's characters comes in sharp focus as a perspective is lent by distancing ^{the} between past and ^{the} present.

In 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird,' Anita Desai delves a lot in the present. Much action of the narrative takes place in the present; the past haunts Adit but not to an extreme. Sarah is not unduly obsessed by her past memories because her decision to marry a 'blackbird' is entirely here.

In 'Where shall we go this summer?' Desai brilliantly uses Sita's memories of past as a narrative technique. The past in the form of 'winter '49' is sandwiched between two phases of Monsoon '67. Here Sita, the protagonist of the novel, looks at her Manori visit as a 'pilgrimage.' The visit of this magic island brings in focus and interplay of ^{realm} of fantasy and imagination represented by winter '47 and the violent world of Bombay typified by her children's pranks. The action in the novel flows from this mix-up of memories (winter '47) and present predicament (Monsoon '67).

In 'Fire on the Mountain,' ^{the} past and ^{the} present play hide and seek just as Nanda Kaul and her great granddaughter, Raka try to outwit each other in protecting ^{their cherished} ~~their cherished~~ solitude. Nanda Kaul has chosen 'Carignano' as her retreat in her sun-set years to relax after a busy life and put her thoughts into a pattern. She wants to lead a peaceful life, full of silence and solitude. With Raka's entry into her silent world, things for Nanda Kaul, ^{move} ~~move~~ in a different way. Raka's natural aloofness disturbs her. She weaves a web of fantasy around her past when she finds Raka showing more interest in Kamal's brilliant story-telling. Raka enjoys her stay at Carignano as it offers an escape from the dark memories associated with her parents' strained relationship. Anita Desai brings in Raka's recall of past memories to provide touching poignancy to the narrative. In case of Ila Des, her present is painful and she relieves pain by recalling her past days when she was a lecturer in the university and Nanda Kaul's hospitality as the V.C.'s wife impressed her.

In 'Clear Light of Day' Anita Desai again weaves an intricate pattern of her protagonists' memories - sad, bitter, painful and some pleasant. As a in ^a ~~in~~ Kaleidoscope ^{faces} ~~focus~~ and places disappear to appear again in a different pattern in a different setting. Memories meet at a point

to diverge again in different directions. The intermittent interplay of the past memories and the present scenario provides a self-sustaining momentum to the narrative.

'In 'The village by the Sea' the novelist uses a simple, straight-forward style which appeals teenagers. The theme of the novel is itself such that it does not demand complex pattern of narration. The novel follows a limpid style and in-depth feeling and recreates the scene with eye-catching details.

In 'In custody,' Desai is not burdened with her protagonist's past memories. On the other hand, Devan's troubles start from the very first page when Muted, his school days friend, disturbs his placid, lacklustre existence at Mirpore by trapping him to interview the greatest Urdu poet, Nur. Devan is, too, willing to follow as Nur was his childhood idol. Troubles follow in plenty and in quick succession. Anita Desai uses the episodes befalling his way for enriching the texture of the novel. This also gives her an opportunity to describe a scene in great detail with tell-tale effect. Nur and his world dominated by wine, biryani, crowd of self-seekers and his two wives is brilliantly juxtaposed with the sullen, sordid world of Sarla, the wife of Devan. The story takes place either at Mirpore or in Delhi and in between aboard a bus which provides Desai a chance to describe the rural scene in north India. The novel, in fact, offers a series of scenes which are comic at most places and

touching at few but life-like everywhere. If on the one hand, Chiku's inept handling of tape-recorder is described with great comic effect, the scene near the canal when Devan takes his son Namu for a walk is touching to the extreme. Desai's style in this novel is refreshingly different from that of her earlier work.

E.M. Forster observed that the introduction of the fantastic in the novel "demands an additional adjustment because of ^{oddness} oddness of its method or subject matter like a side-show in an exhibition where you pay six pence as well as the original fee."⁵⁶ Fantasy in Desai's novels has its germs in reality and as such serves as a prop to the main theme. The interweaving of reality and fantasy provides more than one layer of meaning to the theme. In 'Cry, the Peacock,' Desai uses fantasy to pin-point the springs of Naya's inner landscape. In 'Bye-bye Blackbird' Sarah confronts her milieu by traversing the realm of fantasy. In 'Where shall we go this summer?' fantasy is used by Sita to justify her absurd decision to 'freeze' her pregnancy. In 'Fire on the Mountain,' Nanda Kaul floats on fantasy to draw Raka in her fold and deviate her from Ramlal's world of 'Churails', ghosts and grotesque. Fantasy is used here as a launching-pad to communicate with each other. In 'Fire on the Mountain,' fantasy serves as ^{an} important link of the total edifice of the novel. Ramlal uses fantasy to fascinate Raka. Raka's fantasy is enveloped in her view of adults' world.

Anita Desai uses fantasy as a significant ploy in 'Clear Light of Day.' 'Bin, Raja and Tara weave their own world of fantasy and by juxtaposing them Desai succeeds in intensifying the impact of the theme.

In 'In custody,' Deven, the protagonist, is always lost in his world of fantasy to run away from the grey solidity of his domestic life, dull, uninspiring job in college and start life afresh with a sense of direction. His fantasy bred in frustration flounders on the solid rock of reality as he commits one blunder after another.

Anita Desai uses symbols in her novels to intensify the appeal of the theme. She employs certain images and symbols frequently to lend depth and density to her novels which singularly (particularly her early work) lack action. These images and symbols ^{form} what she calls "a mythology that symbolises her private morality and philosophy."⁵⁷

In 'Cry, the Peacock,' the dance of peacocks and recurring dust storms manifest the stirrings in the heart of Naya," like Shiva's, their dance of joy is the dance of death, and they dance, knowing that they and their lovers are all to die."⁵⁸ Images of oil, wick, ants, well, trapped monkeys and the moon "throbbing like a bloody human organ." frequent this deeply disturbing novel.

Images of death, disaster and destruction also figure in 'Voices in the city.' Nirode's observations of 'the cannibal' mother, the city of destruction and the utter absurdity of love and marriage point to his obsession with failure and destruction.

In 'Bye-bye, Blackbird,' the metaphor of 'blackbird' for an alien Indian is evoked through the narrative as Adit and Dev chatter continuously. But later, Adit is haunted by the owls, peacock and jackals as he lies in Sarah's bed. "That night, it was not the large unhurried owl's cry that he heard but the raving of peacocks and jackals that make the Indian night loud with reminders of the emptiness, the ^{melancholy} melancholy of everything."⁵⁹

The title of Anita Desai's 'Where shall we go this summer?' is itself symbolic. In an interview she asserted that the title was symbolic and "the words have almost an illicit ring to them, as if we were planning not a holiday but an escape."⁶⁰

The first section of the novel is replete with images of violence and destruction which hammer the psyche of hypersensitive Sita. Blood, destruction and violence agitate her. The hitch-hiking foreigner "not knowing anything but going on nevertheless with his innocence" is symbolic of Sita's concept of dreams and desires. The sea is a "mystic unknown" between Bombay and the magic island. Manori stands for 'primitive reality' and the city typifies the rational in life.

The title 'Fire on the Mountain' is also symbolic. Raka's ^{announcement} announcement, "Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire. Look, Nani-look - the forest is on fire," is pregnant with symbolism.

Anita Desai adroitly uses appropriate images to focus on Nanda Kaul's longing for a life of silence and solitude. "she would lie still, still- she would be charge charred ^{tree} trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard ^{on} stone wall."⁶¹ A superb image of approaching sunset in the hills is created as "the first breeze of late afternoon came wandering in, swinging the curtain with a dancer's ^{movement} ~~movement~~"⁶²

The dust storm is a recurring image in Desai's novels. The dust storm, followed by the rains has been beautifully captured in 'Fire on the Mountain'. "...they watched the clouds drop from the sky, swollen and heavy with cold, like a great polar bear crouching hurrying over the hill tops, its white firs setting on roof tops, brushing the hill sides, enclosing the pines. Then it was upon them. With it, the rain."⁶³ As the storm gathers momentum, Desai uses the bronze ^{Buddha} ~~Buddha~~ as an effective symbol. "Raka backed away, came and sat on a ^{stool} ~~stool~~, put out a finger and stroked a little bronze ^{Buddha} ~~Buddha~~ that sat inscrutably smiling and stillly counting its beads on the table top."⁶⁴ The symbol of eagle going down into the valley has been effectively used to signal Ila Des's imminent end.

'Clear Light of Day' begins on a note of the Koel's call and ends with 'Vah' 'Vah', on the song of the old master. The Koel's Call symbolises the world of nature and the song of the old master ^{stands} ~~stands~~ for the human age and

time. Anita Desai builds up the fantasy world of children through images of fun, frolics, excitement and adventure. Raja, his hero, Hyder Ali Sahib on a white horse and his love for poetry, Bin and her burning idealism of Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale, and Baba's love for monotone ^{stemming} ~~stemming~~ from the gramophone - all are vividly drawn. The image of the well in the garden is a philosophical comment on the existence of this life and its essence. "But there was no milk, the cow had died, drowned in the well. In that well, deep and stony and still, in which all must drown to die. The ^{navel} ~~navel~~ of the world it was, secret and hidden in thick folds of grass, from which they all emerged and to which they must return, crawling on their hands and knees"⁶⁵ Incidentally, the image of well also figures in 'Where shall we go this summer?'

In 'In custody,' the title is somewhat misleading. It is about an emotional prison, a spiritual prison, not a physical one."⁶⁶ Deven, "a two-cigarette man" exchanges his past for the present by accepting guardianship of Nur and his poetry. Desai's intention of exchange of one kind of custody for another is clear by the title of the novel as well as by many images of imprisonment which figure at crucial junctures in the novel. Another significant symbol in the novel is that of a tape-recorder. It is a complex symbol of hope, disappointment and finally, failure of Deven's life.

Amita Desai handles the English ^{language} ~~languages~~ beautifully to create the Indian scene, with all its sights, sounds, colours, complexity and contradictions. She uses the ~~languages~~ with a flawless felicity which is model of clarity and intense feeling. She uses words almost in a musical vein. The use of Hindi words at certain places provides a peculiar flavour to her novels and a local colour.

In 'Cry, the Peacock,' Maya's ^{early} ~~early~~ phase of married life is described with a tender touch. "... Quietly I breathed the night in, letting the rhythm of the chant wash over me in swift, regular waves. Night, night, deep, dark, night." 67

The poetical language is also used in 'Voices in the city' to convey the natural scene of Kalimpong: "The solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves and then earth laid with great fallen leaves." 68.

In 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird', Desai depicts Sarah's reverie in a dream-like sequence: "Sarah lay awake, face turned to the window where she could see the branches of the Cedar tree lifting and falling and turning in the breeze against a moon-milky sky. She listened to the stream rush and an owl cry and felt herself cut loose from her moorings and began to drift round and round, heavily and giddily, as though caught in a slow whirlpool of dark, deep water." 69

In 'Clear Light of Day' Desai portrays characters in a brilliant way. The memorable character of Mira Nani is described in one pithy sentence. 'She was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth.'⁷⁶ In this novel, too, words like 'Mato,' 'Mato,' 'Vah' 'Vah' are cleverly used to produce the local effect.

In 'In custody,' Desai's mastery over her medium of expression touches dizzy heights. The novel is about relationships in different settings. Desai describes a particular character and episode in crisp, concise language.

Deven is described as a "two-cigarette man" and "Mured had" betel-stained teeth, the toothbrush moustache, the ^{fiddling,} shifty, untrustworthy ways. "Nur is sketched as having." Filthy abuse, rotten guns, raw liquor, too many years and too much impotent rage." Nur's expression when Deven meets him for the first time is described in one powerful sentence. "A wrinkled eyelid moved, like a ^{turtle's} ~~turtle's~~, and a small quick eye peered out at Deven as if at a tasty fly."⁷⁷ Deven's relief when Sarla permits, ~~Mam~~ to talk to him is effectively put across in a sentence: "It (tension) lay in dead coils at his feet..."

Anita Desai's language has colour, song and sparkle. There is resonance of landscape in her writing and a whiff of fresh air wafts through her novels ~~writing~~. Her prose is close to poetry, the poetry of a sensitive soul in search

of meaning in disillusionment. Her writing bristles with a crispness which is not easy to come across in other Indo-English fiction writers. She has the uncanny ability to sum up in a few well-chosen words or lines the essence and spirit of a place or person. Her command of English is superb without many false notes. No wonder Desai makes her art look like a child's play.

Critics have noted absence of humour in her novels though her short stories do have 'lighter moments.' But it is inevitable as Desai has chosen mostly tragic themes as her subject matter of novels. But it is simply not true that her novels are entirely devoid of humour. Laughter and lighter moments are there and they tickle us with their gentle, ^{humorous} ~~humorous~~ touch. Her humour is not loud and vulgar. It is tongue-in-cheek humour in tune with the sombre drama that is enacted in her novels.

In 'Cry, the Peacock,' Desai imparts a ~~humorous~~ ^{humorous} touch through a minor character "the pink, plump, pretty" Pon mainly to relieve the tense drama that is slowly building up in Maya's consciousness. Her appetite for Saris is immense and she begs Maya "to come shopping with her, and then burrow through the bazars like an avid rabbit, leaving a chace of ^{silk} ~~silk~~ and cotton strewn behind her, as well as the ~~exjolings~~ ^{exjolings} and curses of a dozen frustrated shopkeepers." ⁷⁸ In 'Voices in the city' again atmosphere is surcharged, yet Desai has gentle digs at the Bengalis' weakness for 'rasgollas.'

In 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird,' Desai introduces humour through portraying different communities of India. In 'where shall we go this summer?' Desai introduces humour through a petty street fight among ayahs. "Rosie was screaming abuses in three languages, clearly ^{either} for the heroine or the villain of the piece."⁷⁹

'Fire on the Mountain' has patches of humour strewn here and there. The postman carrying letters to Nanda Kaul had been in the army for fifteen years and the discipline of the army life still stayed with him. He lived strictly according to rules" as though there were still a sergeant-major behind him, shouting orders whenever he stopped, getting him to move on, punctually and obediently. The postman's ideal was the donkey and he lived like one..⁸⁰ In 'Clear light of Day,' Anita Desai imparts a touch of humour through the episode when Dr. Biswas takes Bin to his house and she meets his mother there. Dr. Biswas's mother has been painted as a neck caricature with her heavy make-up and gaudy dress. "Bin had never seen anyone so dressed, so ^{bathed} ~~bathed~~, so powdered. She seemed to be dusted all over with flour. Perhaps she had fallen into a flour bin, like a large bun."⁸¹

Desai's 'In custody' is not so dark and full of despair as her other novels are. There are cracks in the bamboo screen through which sunshine filters in occasionally. Desai provides scenes of fun, hilarity galore though it must be admitted that at certain stages they have a ^{tinge} ~~tinge~~ of sadness about them.

Mirpore, where Deven leads a bored life, is known for a particular sweet which "consisted of a shiny yellow stuff that was shaped into balls on which flies crawled as if in animated illustration of the laws of gravity."⁸⁰ Desai splashes gentle humour when Deven ^{aboard} ~~aboard~~ the bus on way to Delhi comes across a passenger who is ^a ~~a~~ petty shopkeeper. He is going to join the celebrations of his nephew's first birthday. "So I closed down my shop for the day, gave up a day's earnings to go. You know what sort of people we are.. when it is a choice between head and heart, we always choose heart, na? Not much head after all..."⁸¹

The annual day at Deven's college provides Desai an opportunity to have a close look on the world of scholars with a touch of gentle humour. "Their scholarly spectacles glistened, nervous hands smoothed down hair and tried to keep away from the cigarette packets in their pockets, throats were repeatedly cleared and a conscientious effort made to seek out ladies and be ostentatiously polite to them - in a relaxed manner of course, as though they did it every day, without thinking."⁸⁴ Deven's ^{colleague} ~~colleague~~, Siddiqui, the head of Urdu department "in keeping with the size and stature of that department, was a small man, whose youthful face ~~was~~ prematurely topped with a plume of white hair as if to signify the doomed nature of his discipline."⁸⁵

Deven's expedition to purchase a tape-recorder for recording Nur's poetry provides some hilarious moments of ^{sheer} after fun. Jain Sahib, the wily shopkeeper of electronics, waxes eloquent on Japan and its people: "Are, Sahib, what are you talking about?.. They are leaders in industry now, Sahib, leaders. If only we had clever people like that in our country - hai, hai- what progress we would see."⁸⁶ Mr. Jain's nephew, Chiku, is as funny as his name. His inept, clumsy handling of the electronic equipment is handled with hilarity. He is a man in a hurry as his "sister's marriage is next week.. and I have no time for all this poetry-shoetry."⁸⁷

A significant feature of Desai's sparsely-used humour (though there is a lot of it in 'In Custody' by Desai's standards) in novels is that it is not provided by her protagonist or other major characters. It lies inherent in situations which are carefully chosen and constructed by Desai in her ^{inimitable} ~~impeccable~~ style. Humour in Desai's novels is not directly related to the mainstream of the narrative. It is used by Desai to give some comic ^{lull} ~~pull~~ to her otherwise gloomy odyssey. An excess of humour may distort the focus and strike a jarring note in her novels. But presence of humour is evident in her stories.

The atmosphere in Anita Desai's short stories is a bit cheerful and relaxed as compared to her novels where it hangs heavy and makes a gloomy presence. It is inevitable in a way because "short stories are often set off by a chance remark or a fleeting image." In her only collection of short stories 'Games at Twilight' (1978) Desai uses a smaller canvas to tell a story but her range is wide and encompasses a large spectrum of society. Her characters in stories have a distinct personality of their own. There is pain, surprise, humour and sometime gentle sarcasm in the way they look at the world and its people around them. A significant feature of Desai's short stories incorporated in the collection is that in not a single story focus is on a woman all the time. Though there are some touching studies of man-woman relationship borne out of wedlock.

Herbert Gold once asserted that a good story-teller must have a story to tell in "some sweet prose." Anita Desai in her stories does tell a story which are really couched in "some sweet prose."

The story 'Games at Twilight' takes a close look at the children's world though it also provides an adult perception on the reality of a so-called success. Desai uses the children's games to ^{conceal} ~~conceal~~ the adults' tendency to assert their power supremacy. The story also contains Desai's pet habit of depicting summer scene in great detail.

'Private tuition of Mr. Bose' takes the readers to a hard-pressed world of a tutor who gives his private tuition to enable him to provide his baby the "first-pair of shoes and soon he would be needing ^{oranges} oranges, biscuits, plastic toys." The tuition goes on as diverse activities of daily life disturb its rhythm. An occasional quarrel between Mr. & Mrs. Bose is followed by a ~~xxx~~ ceasefire as Mrs. Bose coaxes him to eat more. "One more as though the extra purse were a peace offering following her rebellion of half an hour ago."88

'Studies in the Park,' I feel, is one of the best stories of the collection. Here Desai picks up a commonplace experience of a family having a scholar and college-going child and being told all the time to study hard, hard for the exam, and "must get a first or else you won't get a job." Suro's search for a place for study in a park leads him to a scene of divine beauty. A young, very pale, Muslim woman lay on a bench and her face was "like a flower, wax-white and composed, like a Persian lily or a tobacco flower at night." Her head lay on the lap of a very old man, "her husband, her father, a lover?" This scene "human, real and alive" was a turning point in Suro's life. And he could not concentrate on books, study or degrees after that, "They ~~sh~~ belonged to the dead, and now I had seen what being alive meant."89

'Surface Textures' treats the real and the apparent in the character of Harish, a government servant who is dismissed

from the job. Marish's starvation and jobless days make him a Swami in the eyes of the ignorant villages in a strange way. Marish "with his matted hair, his blue, starved skin and single-focused eyes"⁹⁰ was worshipped, fed and watched over by the villages and Marish "in turn, watched over their offerings and worshipped."⁹¹ The swami is strongly reminiscent of 'Raju' in 'The Guide' by R.K. Narayan.

In 'Sale,' there is an artist who creates birds and flowers of his imagination on the ^{Canvases} canvases but fails to sell them to a bunch of neo-cultured who pretend to know much but know too little in reality.

'Pineapple cake' is about a "nervous rather than rebellious child ^{who} is taken to a marriage service party by his mother and is given the bait of a ~~pot~~ pineapple cake. A sudden tragedy spoils the entire atmosphere of the party and there were "the screams and sobs" of the women. Victor loses the urge to take the pineapple cake despite Mrs. Fernandes's pushing and prodding. For Victor the pastry dish was now like a "corpse on the red rexine sofa."

In 'The Accompanist,' a fifteen-year old boy is emotionally linked with a ^{renowned} ~~renowned~~ ~~used~~ as a tanpura player. The fifteen year old relationship transcends physical barriers and assumes a metaphysical tone. Their relationship is based on "solid ground level- the relationship of love." They vibe perfectly. "We never diverge, we leave and we arrive together. Is this not love?"

No marriage was closer."⁹² This suggestion of sublime togetherness also finds an echo in 'Clear, Light of Day' when Bin "felt an immense, almost irresistible yearning to lie down beside his (Baba) ..limb to limb, silent and immobile together... his slightness would fit it beside her size that his concavities would mould together with her convexities. Together they would form a whole that would be perfect and pure."⁹³

'A devoted Son' focuses on a son-father relationship. An old man in the evening of his life is looked after well by his ~~my~~ devoted son who happens to be a successful doctor. But his honest intentions to impose restrictions on his (father's) diet to enable him to lead a healthy life are interpreted in a different way. "He weighs the food he gives me, Bhatia - he has scales to weigh it on. That is what it has come to."⁹⁴

In 'The Farewell party,' Desai unmasks the hypocrisy and falsehood which go by the name of high society - a society where persons are known by their brands rather than names. Desai lambasts the "women to whom the most awful thing that had ever happened was the screw of golden ^{ear-ring} ~~earring~~ disappearing down the bathroom sink or a mother-in-law's visit or an ayah deserting just before the arrival of guests."⁹⁵ 'The Farewell party' has a ^{watery} ~~water~~-thin story line but Desai compensates this by providing a life-like atmosphere which envelopes such farewell parties. An undercurrent of humour and satire marks this story.

^{Pigeons}
'Pigeons at Day break' is a poignant story of asthma-afflicted Mr. Basu and his wife Otima. In fact, the story focuses on Mr. Basu and how he struggles alone in the night following an attack of asthma. Mr. Basu's sentence 'Leave me alone' when his wife asks him to go down in the morning as "the electricity is on again" captures the sufferings he had to undergo during the night.

The story is based on an old lady's asthmatic husband's remark "leave me alone" following "an extremely bad night and finding rest and peace only towards morning".⁹⁶ Desai picks up the remark and weaves this touching story around it.

'Scholar and Gypsy', the lengthiest story of the collection, peeps into the brick-by brick collapse of David and Pat's married life. David and Pat, an American couple, are on a exotic visit to India. David is working on his sociological thesis. The wife Pat is terribly upset by the heat, summer and high-society atmosphere of Bombay. David takes her to the cool hills of Manali which proves a graveyard of his married life. A strange vision, a recurring theme in Desai's fiction, descends upon Pat as she scouts the area in and around Manali and is taken in by the simplicity and innocence of the hill people. For her to walk through the forest and come upon the little shrine was "like coming out into the open and breathing naturally again, without fear"⁹⁷ The milieu and flower-children of the hills mark a turning-point in Pat's life for here she experiences a kind of 'nirvana.'

'Games at Twilight' captures sights, sounds and the scenic beauty of the Indian landscape and its inscrutable people. A close, careful study of the collection reveals that these stories have seeds of poetic sensibility and intense, in-depth portrayal of people and their environs which are really Desai's material and find full play in Desai's novels.

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C H A P T E R I V

DESAI'S ATTITUDE TO LIFE - HANDLING OF HUMAN LIFE THROUGH NATURE AND SOCIETY

Literature echoes life in its myriad forms. It is a part of it. As Anita Desai puts it, "^{Literature}lecture can't be torn away from the fabric of life as though it were a decoration or an excrescence — it is woven into it, inextricably."¹ Literature records the ups and downs, dreams, defeats and disappointments of life and humanity. Anita Desai as a practitioner of high order of fiction plumbs deep into the consciousness and attempts to embroider a pattern out of chaos. She highlights the agony and anguish arising out of marriage as it affects a sensitive woman but her approach is not that of a feminist who seeks to provide solutions of social problems through slogan-raising women marchers. She focuses her attention on the inter-play of social forces with the human psyche and how they change their contours with the passage of time.

Desai's characters, as a rule, do not make profound statements on life. Their philosophy of life is implicit in the way they respond to human relationships and environment around them. Anita Desai picks up a character from a particular sector of society and weaves an intricate web of relationships around it. Nature often provides a panoramic backdrop to this interface between individual and society. Desai's novels convey the dark, contemporary

sense of broken connections between man and nature, and individual and society. In this chapter, I have attempted to explore Desai's attitude to life and how nature and society have been used for this purpose.

Nature is a dominant force in Desai's novels. Her characteristic feminine sensibility imparts an edge and dimension to her outlook on nature. Her love for and obsession with nature is not something phoney and superficial. It is part of a larger vision around which her novels are structured. Nature provides her novels an exotic charm and colourful touch. It also helps in dissolving, to an extent, the all-pervasive gloom which often hangs over Desai's fiction.

Anita Desai provides a sensuous communion with nature in her novels. Her fiction is thick with fauna and flora. Almost all her novels have sweet smells and sounds of nature. Her knowledge of plants, flowers and wild life is amazing. Numerous varieties of flowers, plants and creepers with their botanical names can be spotted in her fictional landscape. Dust storms, summer days ^{soothing} seeting spring and monsoon have a looming presence in her works.

'Cry, the Peacock' has all the innocence and exuberance of a first work by a writer. It is replete with detailed pictures of nature. The beginning of the novel is marked by "Gentle bees", "unthinking butterflies,"

the dead body of the pet dog and "the bougainvillea-coloured evening air." Maya's garden has a large variety of ^{exotic} ~~exotic~~ flowers and she has a close communion with "petunias—floppy, white and faint mauve petunias—which at dusk threw a piercing swoon of scent, a poignant, half-sweet, half-sad fragrance, that matched my mood to perfection."²

Maya, the major figure in the novel, admits her rejoicing "in — the world of sounds, senses, movements, odours, colours, tunes."³ The title of the novel itself has a deep symbolical significance. The cries, calls and mating of peacocks evoke ^{frenzied} ~~frenzied~~ picture of Maya's anguish and restlessness. The dance of peacocks is a mixture of joy and death: "How they stamp their feet, and beat their beaks against the stones, to ease their own pain....Before they mate they fight. They will rip each others' breasts to stripe and fall, bleeding with their beaks open and panting..."⁴ Incidentally, it is the death of Toto, the pet dog, that triggers off the narrative in the novel.

Dust storms frequent Desai's novels. In 'Cry, the Peacock', the dust storm finds its echo in the mood of Maya in the closing stages of the novel.".... the frenzied bougainvilleas lashed against the window panes, writhed and lashed... And then the dust came pouring in, more and more followed, and I could see nothing but its strange, tinted glow, though I could hear the trees bend, creaking and ^{screaming} ~~screaming~~ in the wind that tore at them and carried away their dry, broken branches."⁵

In 'Voices in the City,' Nirode leads a bohemian life in the dark pandemonium that is Calcutta. Here, too, nature in the form of river "took one enfolded and slid one away into the dark, silently. Nirode liked this sense of having an unlit channel flow through his ^{veins} views along which he could move in secrecy."⁶ Monisha's diary throws light on her love for nature. She enjoyed the days, away from Calcutta and the joint family, near Kalimpong and "the solitude of the jungles there, the aqueous shadows of the bamboo groves and the earth laid with fallen leaves. The bell-like dignity of the elephant on whom we rode through the jungles."⁷ This is in sharp contrast with the dark, gloomy existence she leads in her in-laws' house in Calcutta. Monisha draws a distinct line between her and the joint family when she observes in her diary that none of the family "ever sleeps out under the stars at night. They have indoor minds, startles and darkness."⁸

'Bye-Bye Blackbird' takes one to the sights and sounds of England. Desai's ^{description} ~~description~~ of London and the countryside looks like a tourist department's documentary of England. There are fields of "ripe hay and wheat and barley, swaying and murmuring in the breeze..." Here is an authentic picture of a typical English countryside: "The neat, hedged lanes swept with poppies and foxgloves, roses and honeysuckle; the streams swaying silver and green with water weeds and trout, crossed by painted bridges..."⁹

Desai uses peacocks and jackals to create "the Indian night loud with reminders of emptiness, the melancholy of everything" which sets in motion the process of self -quest in Adit and finally forces him to leave England with his English wife Sarah. Adit in his mental drift seeks Indian landscape in the outspread hair about Sarah's shoulders.

Sarah's sojourn in her parents' countryside house brings a remarkable ^{transformation} ~~transformation~~ in her as well as Adit. As Adit sleeps, Sarah finds herself awake, "face turned to the window where she could see the branches of the cedar tree lifting and falling and turning in the breeze against a moon-milky sky. She listened to the stream rush and an owl ~~exal~~ cry and felt herself cut loose from her moorings and begin to drift round and round, heavily and giddily, as though caught in a slow whirlpool of dark, deep water."¹⁰ In a paragraph like this, Desai establishes connection between her characters and nature.

'Where shall we go this summer? has its setting in Bombay and the magic island of Manori. Sita, the central character of the novel, seeks escape from the violence in Bombay to the picturesque island of Manori. While in Bombay, nature provides her much-needed security with its grove of palms, "watchful cranes, always half-awake, ready to spring to life at the slightest touch or alteration in light and wind, raise their wings and give voice to warning."¹¹ Trees cast a protective ring round Sita - and sometimes

frighten her: "The grove was like a radar system planted around her house. At times, she almost feared it and then unquiet heaved inside her again."¹² Sita's dilemma as how to prolong her pregnancy finds its echo in a situation like this. Here, nature marks a turning point in the novel as Sita decides to keep the unborn child inside and stay in the magic island of Manori. As in Bombay, Sita also finds communion with nature in the island: "She felt surrounded by ~~presences~~ the presence of the island itself, of the sea around it, and of the palm trees that spoke to each other and sometimes, even to her."¹³

Manori emerges as ^{an} illusion, as a refuge in the eyes of Sita when she decides to go there on being asked, "where shall we go this summer?" Sita concludes that it was better to swim back into the net as the sea was so dark. The island would keep her baby unborn. The sea would dissolve her frenzy and its tide "would lull the children, too, into smoother, softer beings. The grove of trees would shade them and protect them."¹⁴

Desai paints the monsoon in 'where shall we go this summer?' in vivid, pastel-shade colours. Its fast-changing moods and its impact on the trees is graphically brought out. "The monsoon flowed- now thin, now dense; now slow, now fast, now whispering, now drumming, then gushing. There was never silence-always the roar and sign of the tide, the moan of the casuarinas in the grove below, tossed and hurled about in grey, tattered billows, the clatter of palm leaves

that hung their ragged fingers down and made channels for the rain to spout down onto the roof."¹⁵

The backdrop of 'Fire on the Mountain' is the picturesque Kasauli and its surrounding hills. Nature casts an imposing shadow in the novel and is an integral part of the narrative.

Nanda Kaul, one of the key characters, is fascinated by barrenness of Kasauli. Its starkness, rocks and pines, light and air set the tone of this deeply moving novel. "In every direction there was a sweeping view- to the north, of the mountains, to the South, of the plains. Occasionally an eagle swam through this clear unobstructed mass of light and air. That was all."¹⁶

'Fire on the Mountain' provides a feast of fauna and flora in their myriad forms. The parrots and their noisy quarrel in the tree-tops is beautifully - captured as "they all screamed and scolded together, then shot off like rockets, scattering pine nuts, disappearing into the light, disintegrating in the heat."¹⁷ Desai paints the sun - set scene like a painter as Nanda Kaul "looked out on the flushed ravine, the ^{molten} ~~molten~~ plains, the sky, filled with a soft, ^{tawny} ~~tawny~~ light in which the sun floated like a lighted balloon making the pine-needles glisten like silk, like floss."¹⁸

Raka's closeness with nature and its soothing effect on her mind is brilliantly brought out by Desai as she goes on her "solitary afternoon expedition, without anyone's knowing." As she scrambled up, "the mentioned of boarding school at Sanawar⁷² still inside her chest, tight as a stone" but now everything changed "with the wind, leaving her light and exhilarated airborne as a seed or a blade of grass."¹⁹

Raka finds a perfect foil in the lap of nature. The destroyed and unbuilt houses, "ravaged, destroyed and barren spaces in Kasauli "drew her like a magnet. The scene of devastation and emptiness which beckoned Raka had "no sound, only silence, no light, only shade"²⁰ She was drawn to "the ravine where yellow snakes slept under grey rocks and agaves growing out of the dust and rubble, the skeletal pines that rattled in the wind, the wind- levelled hill tops...."²¹

Raka fully dissolves herself in nature as the narrative moves to a fiery end. The hills, the wind, the sea and the waves fuse together as she "sat there, chin on her knees, looking out on the hills that flowed, wave on wave, to the horizon, and listened to the wind that blew up and crashed into the pines, then receded and went murmuring away like the sea. She narrowed her eyes and the greys and blues of the scene melted together, till waves and hills, sea and wind were all one. She was in a boat, rocking, alone."²²

Like Raka, but in a different way Nanda Kaul also seeks parallel in nature. The bareness and emptiness of her garden draw her because "like her, the garden seemed to have arrived, simply by a process of age, of withering away and an elimination, at a state of elegant perfection."²³

The Koels' call set the tone and tenor of 'Clear Light of Day.' The very first page of the novel reads like a catalogue of exotic flora. The garden of the Das family had a rose walk besides a host of trees including fig and silver oak, mulberry and eucalyptus, the papaya and lemon and "the bushes of ~~the~~ mimiscus and oleander, the ^{beds} ~~beds~~ of canna lilies...." A scene of early evening during the hot, dusty days of summer is beautifully evoked as the gardener trained the garden hose on the jasmines, the palas and the earthy scent enveloped the environment. "A pair of hoopoes promenaded sedately up and down the lawn, furling and unfurling the striped fans on their heads. A scent of spider lilies rose from the flower pots massed on the veranda steps as soon as they were watered like ladies newly bathed, powdered and scented for the evening."²⁴

Nature heralds ill-health for Raja in 'Clear Light of Day.' The atmosphere of that spring, dust storms and violence in the air, the terrific heat and the parched earth, "the Koels that called frantically in the trees all days" and the rumour that sailed in the city like sand or smoke, made Raja ill.

Aunt Mira and her relationship with the children of the Das family is depicted by Desai in terms of nature. Mira Masi "was the tree, she was the soil, she was the earth"²⁵ while children were for her "the leaves and flowers and fruit of the earth."

Tara's mentioning of the elaborate and expensive preparations for the wedding of Moyna, the first of Raja's daughters, leaves Bim cold. In this frame of mind, she seeks company in "the usual summer morning sounds of mynahs quarrelling and ^{shrilling} ~~striking~~ on the lawn, the pigeons beginning to mutter comfortably to each other in the veranda, dry, leaves and scraps of paper ^{swirling} ~~swirling~~ down the drive and blowing into hedges and corners."²⁶

Desai's novel for teenagers, 'The village by the Sea' provides her ample scope to delve deep into nature. The novel is replete with ~~descriptive~~ descriptions of birds, flowers, plants, the tide in the sea the sun-setting and the advent of the monsoon in Bombay.

Anita Desai creates a beautiful morning scene at Thul as the light "filtered through the web of palm leaves" and ^{dew} ~~dew~~ still settled on the rough grass and the spider webs glistened. The sun-set scene is evoked through colourful details: "The horizon was brightly lit by the sun that ^{seemed} ~~seemed~~ to be melting into the sea like a globe of mottled glass. The sky had paled to lemon yellow and in the east it was already mauve. A star appeared, the brilliant evening star that was always the first to shine."²⁷

When Hari returns from Bombay, Thul and its environs make him a new person who has just "emerged from a tightly shut box and now saw the light and felt the breeze for the first time."²⁸ It is ^{his} rebirth -- "a butterfly emerged from a Cocoon."

In 'The Village by the Sea,' Desai's descriptions of the sights and sounds of the small fishing village, of the birds, of a mongoose hunt, of a storm are precise but never pedantic.

The setting of Desai's 'In Custody' does not provide much scope for nature. Still, she has managed to scatter the green patches of nature here and there in the narrative. Deven's walk with his son provides such a situation. Nature's soothing touch in the form of evening gives Deven "an unaccustomed peace of mind, contentment with the things they were and a certain modest, suburban well being."²⁹.

Desai's description of the parrots in most of her novels is ^{superb} ~~sympathetic~~. In 'In custody,' too, she creates a beautiful picture involving parrots which "exploded out of an acacia tree and streaked over the fields, acid green against the pale yellow of the western sky."³⁰ As the parrots circled around and returned to the tree, "one brilliant feather of spring green fluttered down through the air and fell at their feet in the grey clay." Deven picks up the ^{feather} ~~feather~~ and presents it to Manu. This touching moment via nature in the life of Deven has been beautifully captured by Desai.

Nature assumes devastating posture in the form of horrid summer in north India as Deven flounders at every stage in dealing with Nur, his two wives, the college money, the tape-recorder and Siddiqui. On his way to record Nur's poetry, Deven hears a man's waiting 'Su - ra- hi' " as if warning of doom." He feels that summer with its heat and thirst has been cruel to him. It "was already here, devastating everything, laying waste his life, like this desolate room."³¹ As the novel comes to closing stages, Deven's stamina is on the verge of collapse and he finds his house "more oppressive, the heat more unendurable, than on any other night that summer." The thought of the coming monsoon with its thunder and rains was welcome as "he could not endure any more of this heat, this waiting."³²

The scene before the monsoon in Delhi has been brilliantly captured by Desai in 'In custody.' The long months of heat and dust laid waste the whole plain around Delhi. "There was nothing to see in it but sulphur - yellow dust, the white sky, the occasional glitter of a tin sheet. Bushes and grasses all appeared to have died; the land was shorn, or shrouded."³³

Nature as a soothing and guiding presence envelopes Deven as he finds hints of light in the east. The call of lipwig fills him with hope and a ray of light after a long tunnel. "There was nothing to be heard but the water rushing past the banks, although it was still too dark to see it... He felt weeds and pampas grass brush against his

legs and his feet grew dusty and then muddy as he walked. Out in the invisible fields a ^{not flying} ~~flying~~ gave a wild, startled cry and he could see the pale flash of its wings in the darkness that was growing ^{dilute} ~~delute~~ now in the east."34

Nature forms a formidable presence in all of Desai's *light* light novels published so far. It appears in various hues and shades. Nature with its smells, sounds, ~~sights~~ ^{sights} pervades Desai's fictional landscape. Desai has used nature to illuminate what is happening in her characters' inner theatre and their milieu. I think she is the only Indo-Anglian writer who has presented nature in such rich, sensuous details. In fact, no other writer in Indian literature after Tagore has treated nature in this fashion. For Desai, nature is not an ornamental showpiece in her writing. It is as vibrant and profound as some of her characters are. Desai deftly employs nature to reveal her view-point on life, people and events. Nature helps in evoking and enriching an atmosphere which is a high point of Desai's style. It provides an extra-dimension to her fiction. Desai's observation of nature is sharp and gives one the impression of watching a landscape painting in soft, soothing pastel shades.

Anita Desai is a writer of insight and intuition which are essentially feminine qualities. She writes mostly about women who are sensitive and intelligent and in most cases belong to the fairly affluent section of society.

Anita Desai has often been accused of writing exclusively about sensitive, highly strung women, their solitude and their futile search for a meaningful relationship in life. Though her focus is on characters and their environment, a close look on her fiction reveals her deep concern for social issues which may not figure in terms of a cause but reflect the writer's sensitivity to a woman's lot.

After all, Desai's role is not that of a Raja Ram Mohan Roy. She indicates the signposts along which a society moves in a particular phase of time. Her novels provide points of identification for a wide spectrum of society—upper middle - class people, the city people, the small-town people, the working men, the widows and the married persons who are mostly sad and solitary. Anita Desai "does not portray these diverse sections of society in a group or for sake of recording social change for she 'does' not think for a writer it means anything unless narrowed down to particulars, that is, the lives of individual characters."³⁵ And it is through the lives of individual characters and their interface with other characters that a distinct pattern of society filters through Desai's fiction.

An underlying current of deep-rooted frustration and loneliness in married life flows through lives of all the protagonists of Desai right from 'Sita ('Cry, the Peacock') to Sarla ('In custody'). Marriage is the focal institution in any society and when it comes under

strain, it is the hard evidence that society is in turmoil. Today, India is in convulsion and what is happening to the institution of marriage provides a measure of the gravity of the situation. The pain of loneliness and frustration is immense because marriage at least provides a cover of security. These apparently sociological issues figure in Desai's fiction in the form of her characters' quest for meaning in life and their relationship with other characters. Anita Desai raises some pointed questions regarding marriage and underlines some areas which breed insecurity, frustration and loneliness resulting in the breakdown of married life.

In 'Cry, the Peacock,' Desai depicts the trauma and tragedy of Maya's married life. The germs of marital discord germinate in the very beginning as Gautama, her husband, fails to share her sorrow on the death of her pet dog. As a visitor comes to meet him, he forgets her and "her woes altogether." The same attitude continues as Gautama fails to feel the core of Sita's heart. His ignorance about his wife is total. As a busy man he fails to give "another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed."³⁶ Maya seems to speak for all similarly-placed women when she muses ^{philosophically} philosophically, "Giving me an opal ring to wear on my finger, he did not notice the translucent skin beneath, the blue flashing

views that ran under and out of the bridge of gold and jotted me into smiling with pleasure each time I saw it."³⁷ There are few areas of common interest between Gautama and Maya. While Maya "yearns for the contact that goes deeper than flesh -- that of thought," Gautama is prosaic, practical and business-like. Chasm between them widens as Maya's alienation is complete. She longs "to touch his temples and soothe the pain.." when Gautama has headache due to overwork but "did not do so, could not dream of doing so." The husband-wife relationship becomes so cold and meaningless that Maya accepts "his preoccupation, his distance from me... as a part of the pattern."

Monisha in 'Voices in the city' shares the same strained relationship with her husband. He, too, cares little for what Monisha wants. Monisha's anguish and loneliness deepens as she is living in a joint family where everyone intrudes on her privacy. The fire smouldering inside Monisha takes a tragic turn as on being charged with a petty theft, she sets her body aflame. Monisha's sad story has a contemporary ring about it as reports of suicide by married women become commonplace. Anita Desai through her protagonist, Monisha, makes a statement on the lot of married women in a joint family set-up.

Sarah's tragedy in 'Bye-bye Blackbird' is self-inflicted. Her decision to marry an alien, Adit, is her own. Adit's attitude towards his English wife is fairly ~~representative~~ representative of a chauvinist who cares little for the individuality and sensibility of his wife. As Dev asks Adit not to wake Sarah by his noise, Adit flares up: "So what? She's used to being woken up. These English wives are quite manageable really, you know. Not as fierce as they look, very quiet and hardworking as long as you treat them right and roar at them regularly once or twice a week."³⁹ It is ~~these~~ ^{this} kinds of attitudes which breed frustration and loneliness in married life in Desai's novels.

Though Sarah continues to live with Adit and show an admirable sense of understanding for Adit, the cracks in their married life cannot escape the attention of a close observer. As Adit decides to leave England, Sarah's concern for him increases. She is aware of the impact of the "smallest refusal or contradiction" on him. She dreads the prospects of a possible collision on this score. Adit's whole personality seemed to be under severe strain those days and Sarah was determined to "sacrifice anything, anything at all, in order to maintain, however, superficially, a semblance of order and discipline in her house, in her relationship with him."⁴⁰ It is Sarah's positive attitude which saves this married life because if "she allowed the chaos to reflect upon their

marriage, she knew its fragments would not remain jangling together but would scatter, drift and crumble."⁴¹

Marriage continues to remain under a ^{siege} seize in 'where shall we go this summer?' Sita, Desai's protagonist in the novel, hits at her in-laws for "their subhuman placidity, calmness and sluggishness"⁴² She grew defiant and assertive with the passage of time. Beneath her married life lurked a silent fury which flared up when Raman made a casual remark on her pregnancy. The sentence, "All through their married life they had preferred to avoid a confrontation.", underlines the vibrating tension of married life.

Their wedding photographs and children's curiosity in them unfold Sita's two-faced personality and observation on married life. Sita "seemed to have adopted -- for the occasion(at the time of marriage) -- the way an insect might adopt certain characteristics not of its own breed for the sake of camouflage and self-defence -- the anonymous look of a shy, not wholly conscious bride, quite unlike her appearance at any other time. It was a look she had immediately discarded and lost. She was amused to turn from the album to mirror and see the layers of experience and melancholy and boredom that had settled upon her face since then....."⁴³. A dark shadow also hangs over the married life of Sita's legendary father as she remembers her childhood days in the magic island of Manori.'

Anita Desai's obsession with married life of her characters or their parents continues in 'Fire on the Mountain.' Nanda Kaul, the widow of a University Vice-Chancellor, relishes her solitude at carignano and in her memory thinks of the house of her married days as "his house, never hers." This observation by a great grandmother is significant as it makes a nonsense of the very concept ^{of married} life. As an efficient and everybusy housewife she had to see "the bread to be spread with butter, jam jars opened and dug into, knives taken away from babies and boys, girls questioned about home work, servants summoned to mop up spilt milk and fetch tea, and life would swirl on again, in an eddy, a whirlpool of which she was the still, fixed eye in the centre."⁴⁴ In fact, the married life of most women is "the still fixed eye in the centre." Nanda Kaul's husband, almost a silent presence in the novel, carried on a life-long love-affair with one Miss David. The memory of that affair, strangely, cooled and calmed Nanda Kaul ^{at} carignano. The subdued but sensual hint of that affair is beautifully expanded in nature's lush setting.: "A waxed moon was ^{climbing} ~~seeming~~ over the ghost-grey branches of the eucalyptus trees along the drive, eerily silent. There was a mingled odour of grass, of phlox, of eucalyptus leaves along with lime, sweet-soaked sports clothes, catgut and clammy tennis shoes" and her husband "had been to drop some of the guests home -no, she corrected herself with asperity, 'one' of the guests home."⁴⁵ No wonder, Nanda Kaul looks

back on her long years as a married woman "not bare and shining as the plains below, but like the gorge, cluttered, choked and blackened with the heads of children and grand children, servants and guests, all restlessly surging, clamouring about her."⁴⁶

Another vignette of married life that appears vividly in the novel is that of Raka's parents. The club party scene takes Raka to her father, "home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammer and fists of abuse -- mother with harsh, filthy abuse.... and her mother lay down on the floor, shut her eyes and wept."⁴⁷ The nocturnal drama of married life witnessed by Raka made her a changed girl. It does not come as a surprise when she seeks company in the wilderness of nature.

Marriage does not take ^{a sinister} sinister turn in the case of Tara in 'Clear Light of Day' though Tara and Bakul have dominant streaks of Desai's other characters. Tara is "a nervous, sentimental lot" and Bakul, like Desai's male characters, is smart, efficient and business like in his approach.

Marriage comes under close scrutiny in the Misra household in the novel. The Misra brothers "silly and idle and obese" were married to women who "liked the new life,

and wanted to be modern women and settle in their own homes in New Delhi and cut their hair short and give parties, or open boutiques or learn modelling." In the case of Misra sisters, the case was reverse. Here the husbands were ultra-modern and smart and "played golf and they danced and gave cocktail parties" and Jaya and Sarla could only knit sweaters and make them pickles. No wonder, they were despatched home soon and "now all they talk about is their school." Desai projects a middle-class family in the form of the Misra family and describes how married life collapses like a pack of playing cards.

'The Village by the Sea' is a novel for teenagers but here, too, married life poses disturbing questions before Lila, Hari and their two sisters. Their father, as expected, is toddy - addicted and does precise little except drinking. As he returns drunk late at night, Lila and Hari try to "shut out the sounds by covering their heads with their pillows" Lila cries to herself and Hari bites his lip: ".... there was a thump again at the front door, their father flung it open, jarring the whole house so that the walls shook.... their father hissed at him(Pinto), then the bumped and lurched his way into their mother's room. They heard her begin to say something in protest, but he grouled at her, then fell down in a heap and snored."⁴⁹ The scene is strongly reminiscent of Raka's experience in

'Fire on the Mountain.' The difference is between setting and performers. The action of both the performers is almost identical and so is the reaction registered on the sensitive souls of children.

Anita Desai picks up the Jagu family to express her views on married life and its associated nightmare in the context of a lower class family. As Jagu takes Hari to his place, the tug-of-war of heated dialogues between Jagu and his wife starts. Jagu tries to show his authority by threatening to go to the toddy shop in case she would not keep quiet. She does not quieten and fumes, "Go, go. As if I can stop you. That's all you want to go to your toddy shop. All you want from me is an excuse... Go. Kill yourself with the poison the shops sell you...I will come and laugh at your funeral."⁵⁰ Jagu's wife seems to speak for all women placed in similar predicament when she observes: "Men can go to the toddy shop and drink and forget, but we can do nothing, so we must lie down and sleep."⁵¹ Hari has sympathy for this woman because "he knew what made her speak in that bitter, sad tone.... He felt as if this woman were speaking for him and for Lila and for their mother."⁵²

In 'In custody', her latest novel, Desai focuses on marriage in a lower middle-class family. Deven, the hero of the novel, has to face his wife Sarla's "story face, her sulks or her open fury" when he gets late in reaching Mirpore from Delhi. Though Sarla speaks little in the novel, her

looks and expressions throw a flood of light on her married life and her dreams prior to marriage. For Deven marriage means "this shabby house, its dirty corners, its wretchedness and loweliness." In 'In custody,' Desai looks at the process of arranged marriage in a middle class family. Sarla was not Deven's choice "but that of his mother and aunts, crafty and cautious women; she was the daughter of a friend of an aunt's, she lived on the same street as that family, they had observed her for years and found her suitable in every way: plain, penny - pinching and congenitally pessimistic."⁵³ But Sarla's dreams of marriage differed sharply from that of elders and was fed by "advertisements, cinema shows and gossip of girl friends." According to her marriage meant "a telephone, a refrigerator, even a car and she herself, stepping out of a car with a plastic shopping bag full of groceries and filling them into the gleaming refrigerator, then.... excitedly ringing up her friends to invite them to see a picture show with her and her husband who was beaming at her from behind a flowered curtain"⁵⁴ She conveniently forgot that there were also things like "bills, instalments or debts" in married life. Marriages fed on such wild fantasies are bound to flounder and Sarla's marriage was not an exception. Disappointments of marriage brought "two dark furrows from the corners of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth, as deep and permanent as surgical scars." Deven knew the cause of

"twin lines of disappointment" because he was also similarly placed. Anita Desai dissects the married life of these two defeated persons in a surgical manner and her observations are startlingly accurate: "Although each understood the secret truth about the other, it did not bring about any closeness of spirit, any comradeship, because they also sensed that two victims ought to avoid each other, not yoke together their joint disappointments. Atleast Deven had his poetry, she had nothing, and so there was an added accusation and bitterness in ^{her} ~~his~~ look."⁵⁵ Sarla's anger is silent because "countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion." "She would scream and abuse only in the kitchen or into the bedroom observing total silence and inciting Manu to weep in sympathy. But Desai also offers another facet of Sarla's married life when she is back again "in her own domain, to assume all its responsibilities, her indispensable presence in it..."⁵⁶ and is moved to see dejected Deven and ask, "Tired? Shall I make you tea?" In fact, it is these gestures which keep married life in middle-class families in India ticking despite all the nightmare associated with marriage.

Anita Desai raises some disturbing questions about parents-children relationship in her work. Her major characters belong to the middle-class society of which the

family unit is the focal ploy. There is hardly any ideal relationship between parents and children in her fiction and the dark shadows of this bitter truth chase her characters, throughout their lives. Here, it is not the case of much-talked about generation gap. Desai in her novels raises some basic issues regarding upbringing of children and the way communication gap snaps the wires connecting members of a family throwing the entire family system out of gear emotionally. In 'Cry, the Peacock,' Arjuna, the rebellious brother of Maya makes his presence through a letter when the narrative is half-way through. Arjuna's movements were "swift, silent, mysterious." He liked to ride a bicycle while his father offered him a car. He looked Marxist in his actions. He argued with his father that the bicycle was cheaper, second-hand, light and ~~flexible~~ besides, one can go everywhere where ^{one} ~~one~~ could'nt in a big car." This observation is significant as it throws light on two opposite tracks the father and the son took. Arjuna's sudden disappearance from home is not surprising when we look closely on his way of thinking "so distant from us down below, so unrelated to our thoughts, our values, that one might as well have talked to a starfish as to him, and so there was nothing to do but set him free."⁵⁷ Arjuna's rebellious streak is also present in Jivan, the brother of Sita in 'where shall we go this summer?' Incidentally, like Arjuna he had also disappeared to reappear again as "a

headline-maker, a turbulent trade union leader always in the ^{knotted} ~~knotted~~ centre of troubles and riots."⁵⁸

Nirode, one of the key characters in 'Voices in the city,' is an arch rebel. His rebellion is directed more against his mother than his father."... Between him and his mother's brilliant territory was erected ~~abashed~~ a barbed wire fence, all glittering and vicious."⁵⁹ Nirode is restless, always on the move unlike his father who spent most of his time in "sleeping and drinking and idling"

In 'Clear Light of day,' Anita Desai forces upon us serious rethinking about traditional familial duties in the context of parents - children relationship. Father, in the novel, in his children's view is "the master of the entrance and the exit." Raja thought that his father "appeared to deal with both family and business by following a policy of neglect, ..as some one leaving for the office or for the club, returning late and too tired for anything."⁶⁰ All the children were so accustomed to his absence that his sudden death was "a small transition from the temporary to the permanent." Their mother, a diabetic, was a perfect foil to her husband and was always busy in cards or club.

It is for sociologists to discuss whether it was fair to land Bin with the life-long responsibility of looking after the mentally-^{retarded} ~~retarded~~ Raja and also entrust her to make out a living by her late father's derlict insurance

business specially when Raja was still around. Another question which crops up is whether the Das parents did their duty for their children. Was it proper for them to spend their evenings in the club playing bridge and socialising and leaving children to the care of Mira Masi? The parents' indictment comes strongly from Bim when she tells Tara: "Father never bothered to teach me. For all father cared, I could have grown up ^{illiterate} illiterate and cooked up for my living, or swept. So I had to teach myself history, and teach myself to teach. But father never realised... that that does not prepared you for running an insurance business..." The Misra brothers also escape their duty while Jaya and Sarla toil and earn money by running a small dance school.

In 'Fire on the Mountain', Desai focuses on Ila Das's brothers who were second to none in shirking from their responsibility. The attitude of Ila's parents is Janus-faced. The fabulous family fortune is lavishly showered on "three drunken, dissolute sons as in a story, and not a penny of it to either of the two clever, thrifty, hard-working daughters, Ila and Rima..."⁶¹ The sons are pampered to an extent that their debts are paid and the house, horses and carriage are sold off to clear the ever-mounting burden of debts. In return, the Das parents and sisters get nothing. Here, the Das parents cannot escape their share of blame in not providing sufficient education or a single penny to their luckless daughters.

Anita Desai's characters are extraordinarily sensitive. She attempts to plumb the feelings of women who face the crossfire of the traditional and the newly found values and feel misfit in both the worlds. Their sensitive nature and overprotective attitude shown by their parents come in the way of their coping with a different milieu. Anita Desai adds the third dimension by ^{going} ~~growing~~ deep into the circumstances from which they have come. It makes the process of adjustment all the more difficult.

Maya, the middle-class ^{housewife} ~~housewife~~ in 'Cry, the Peacock' faces the same dilemma. Her neurotic behaviour becomes ^{bizarre} ~~Wizarrre~~ as she thinks about the childhood prophecy of disaster. Her situation is aggravated as she also suffers from father-fixation. Her suicide does not come as a surprise. Monishain 'Voices in the city' too, fails to adjust with her dehumanised surroundings after marriage. Monisha's suffering and tragic end are due to the scant care shown by members of the in-laws' family. A watch is kept on her movements and she is deprived of her privacy. The noted sociologist, Dr. Promilla Kapur in her book 'Love, Marriage and Sex' echoes what Maya, Monisha, Sarah and Sita suffer in their married life: "In the impersonal and de-individualised atmosphere of the big urban centres, one is liable to feel alienated as well as neglected and almost starved for genuine love and affection."

The existence of widows and their pathetic lot also figures in ^{Desai's} ~~Desai~~ novels. In the traditional Indian family, the widows have to suffer a lot. They are treated like bonded labour and thought to be ^{an} ~~as~~ ill-women. Anita Desai's depiction of Aunt Mira in 'Clear Light of Day' is deeply touching. She was widowed at an early age and grew "shabbier and skinnier and seedier with the years." ~~Thence~~ "Through the technique of flashback Anita Desai brings Aunt Mira alive as a widow when she was cursed by members of her husband's family because in their view she had brought disaster in the family. To repent for her guilt she was to cook and wash for them. "At night she massaged her mother-in-law's legs and nursed wakeful babies and stretched trousseaux for her sister-in-law."⁶³ She aged early and this saved her from sexual exploitation by her brothers-in-law. She was the butt of vulgar jokes and ~~as~~ ridicule.

Anita Desai juxtaposes the lives of a married woman and a widow through the observant eyes of children. For them "a wife is someone like their mother.... who spent long hours at a dressing table before a mirror, amongst jars and bottles.... who commanded servants and chastised children and was obeyed like a queen"⁶⁴ In contrast, Aunt Mira was like a stick who "whipped her sari about her, jammed a few long steel pins into the little knot of hair on her head, and was dressed in an instant, ready to fly.... she was not soft, scented or sensual. She was bony and angular, wrinkled and desiccated - like a stick, or an ancient tree to which they ~~and~~ adhered."⁶⁵

In 'Voices in the City,' mother of Nirode, Monisha and Anla leads a widow's life in Kalimpong but her sensual relationship with major ^{Chadha} ~~Chadher~~ and her strained relationship with her husband when he was alive hardly project her as a copy-book widow in the traditional Indian family. In 'Fire on the Mountain,' Nanda Kaul leads a widow's life but this facet has nothing to do with her central problem.

Anita Desai's perceptions of Indian society are of high order. She flashes many dark corridors of society which remain clogged in sociological surveys and studies and seldom figure as a work of art in novels. The ^{Janus-} ~~Janus-~~ faced attitude of society towards women comes under close scrutiny in Desai's fiction. The male-dominated society adopts one attitude towards men and prescribes another set of pattern for women. This theme in itself is not something new or shocking but the way in which Desai treats this aspect of society is disturbing and makes us sit up and ask: What is this thing we call life? What is it all about?

In 'Fire on the Mountain,' the treatment meted out to Ila Das by her parents is a case in point. In their heyday, the Das family spent lavishly on education and luxurious life style of their sons while Ila and her sister were starved of their normal quota of financial security or educational opportunity. The Das family's expectations

of their sons go haywire and it is only the grit and hard work of daughters which keeps the Das family alive. Again, in 'Fire on the Mountain,' the mother of Raka suffers indignities at the hands of her husband largely because his actions and activities go unchallenged in this male-dominated society and the irony is even her mother seems to take up the erring son-in-law's case and implores her daughter to make a try again in adjustment.

In 'Clear Light of Day,' Bim has to shoulder the responsibility of running the family when Raja, conveniently forgets his role and settles with his in-laws in Hyderabad. The way she has been treated by her brother leaves deep scars of hurt and it is not easy for her to forget and forgive Raja for his treachery. It is surprising that Tara and Bakul ^{shrug} off this fact and hardly ^{condemn} Raja's conduct. On the other hand, Bim's behaviour is considered as under unbecoming of a sister.

This double-faced attitude of society comes under fire when Intiaz Bibi, the second wife of the celebrated poet Nur in 'In Custody' writes a letter to Devan and raises some sharp and pointed questions about the role of society. She asks Devan why she was considered 'incapable of understanding the need to record Nur Sahib's voice for posterity.' Intiaz Bibi laments that her real worth

as a poetess of some sort has not been recognised and she has been considered simply a prostitute "who dazzled Nur Sahib's eyes." She asks Deven, "Do you imagine it was possible for a common dancing girl to win the heart of a great poet?"⁶⁸ Bibi throws an open challenge to Deven to read her poems "or if they fill you with fear and insecurity because they threaten you with danger- danger that your superiority to women may become questionable."⁶⁹ Imtiaz Bibi's letter to Deven is a deeply disturbing document on the double-faced attitude of society. The letter poses some vital and disturbing questions regarding society's discriminating stance. "Was it not intolerable to you that a woman should match their gifts and even out-strip them? Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are a male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement, while I, because I was born female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can ~~be~~ ⁱⁿ being maligned, ~~not~~ ^{mocked} ignored and neglected?"⁷⁰ In a passage like this Anita Desai assumes the tone of a feminist for a cause. Though Desai insists that a true artist should observe the social scene with a certain objectivity, this passage reveals that the 'self' of women in Desai has filtered through these lives.

In her book, 'Marriage and the Working women in India,' the eminent sociologist Dr. Promilla Kapur points out that India has witnessed wide-ranging changes in all sections of life since the twenties and the pace of change has quickened after Independence. Dr. Kapur in

her scholarly study notes that the process and ~~pace~~ ^{pace} of change has brought about a new awareness among fast expanding section of working women. In India, traditions are strong and deep-rooted and it will take a long, long time when women achieve what she calls "socio-economic emancipation." The Country is in a flux and the Indian women cannot remain immune to the changes which are taking place around them. The 'new' woman is not confident enough to play the Twin-role a working woman has to play in society. Like a puppet on string, she has to balance her two worlds of family and the place of work. A slight mistake, a slip or misunderstanding can throw her family life on the rocks. As the rush for jobs becomes fierce among women, the family and society face new challenges of individuality, independence and adjustment.

Anita Desai has focused her attention on these women and issues in a few novels. She has dissected their lives and life-style and milieu around them with a certain degree of sympathy and understanding.

In 'Cry, the Peacock,' Maya is not a working woman but she has the memories of a friend who ^{earned} turned to support the family. Maya's friend, Leila taught Persian literature in a girls' College and ~~remains~~ reminded Maya of poppies. She had fallen in love with a man who was dying of tuberculosis. She looked after her patient husband and corrected students' papers. She was "one of those who require a cross, cannot walk without one."

In 'Voices in the City,' Desai introduces Amla who "is a rare image of the girl leaving her parents and coming to the city to follow ^{the} ~~she~~ career of an artist."⁷¹ Her character pales into ^{insignificance} ~~significance~~ because of two other dominant characters in the novel - Nirode and Monisha. Amla is a sensitive woman who has to face dehumanised society and modern civilization.

But Sarah in 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird' has to perform her double role in day-to-day life. On her way back from work she "seemed merely an anaemic working girl.... with nothing to look forward to that evening that could bring any warmth to her white forehead or her grey eyes."⁷²

Sarah is an efficient and thoroughly professional working woman. In her approach to professional work she reminds one of Raman in 'where shall we go this summer?' She has school's letters "opened, signed, pinned, put in this tray and that. Bills paid, cheques written out. Lunch duty and games duty and recess duty allotted fairly, justly and irrevocably to this teacher and that"⁷³ she works like a robot. "counting, tidying, taking out and putting in-- some mechanism had taken her over, wound her up with a key and set her moving and working in a comfortably assured and uncomplicated way, performing the daily tasks evenly and smoothly...."⁷⁴ Back at home Sarah has to satisfy her Indian husband and his appetite.

Sarah leads an insecure existence because of her marriage with an Indian and the stress on this score shows in her actions at school though outwardly she is an efficient secretary of ^{a head} ~~a head~~ of an institution. She wants to escape from the society she belongs to because of her Indian connections. This is clear when she wants to avoid any discussion about her husband during tea-break at school. Sarah has not the courage of a rebel. She seeks escape routes when her marriage with Adit is discussed.

A single working woman has to face many hazards at place of her work. This aspect of the social scene is depicted through the dialogue of a Bengali woman in a party in 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird.' "Those horrible men, those 'ogres'" she hissed.... "All at least fifty years old and with a dozen grand children at home, but if they saw an unmarried working girl - 'toba'... they just go a madd mad. They think that if you are working and not married, it must be because you are....!"⁷⁵

A single working woman's woes do not end with such kind of remarks. A single, ugly, Woman who is out to bring social awareness as a government welfare officer, has to meet a more bizarre end. Ila Das Das in 'Fire on the Mountain' has to confront solid social realities in a remote rural area. Her efforts to end social evils face a rock-like resistance from the powerful, local interests. She convinces women who are willing "to try and change their

dreadful lives by an effort...." but the male-dominated society comes in the way. According to Ila Das "the women would listen to me- if anyone knows what it is for a girl to be married and bear children at the age of twelve."⁷⁶ The blood-chilling rape and murder of Ila Das ("crushed back~~ed~~ crushed down into the earth, she lay raped, broken, still and finished" ⁷⁷) raises many sociological and ^{psychological} ~~psychological~~ questions regarding fate of a single, working woman in an obscure village.

Bim in 'Clear Light of Day' is a lecturer in history at a college in Delhi. She is self-made and supports the whole family. She has seen many upsets in her life and has made up her mind to remain single and work. If she desired, she would have easily accepted the ~~veiled~~ ^{veiled} proposal of Dr. Biswas. In fact, Bim is a born working woman who declared confidently in her early youth: "I shall ~~work~~ earn my own living -- and look after Mira Masi and Baba and and be independent."⁷⁸ Her words proved prophetic.
in the dark x

Anita Desai has also ^{dabbled} ~~debbed~~ in the dark world of cabaret dancers and dancing girls in her novels. In 'Cry, the Peacock,' there is a detailed description of a cabaret dance in a restaurant. Desai gives a realistic picture of the cabaret dancers and their lives. Their ~~race~~ and colour may vary but the reality beneath powdered, painted face is the same. Their movements look mechanical

and give the impression of callisthenics that is "necessary for correcting and improving their merchandise — their figures — inflicted upon them, in the privacy of dark, small rooms that smelt of unclean latrines and panting beasts, hidden away in ^{the} unlit lanes from which they emerged, rightly, to ^{don} ~~down~~ the glittering garb of their strenuous trade."⁷⁹ Desai spotlights on the key dancer and as the music grew livelier she began to move in jerks "meretricious abandon entering into her movements as though she were shouting, or wanting to shout, "See, ^{what} ~~what~~ I have? Like it? Take it, gentlemen, take it, it's yours!"⁸⁰

In 'In custody,' Anita Desai portrays the life of a dancing girl, Imtiaz Bibi, who also happens to be the second wife of Nur. Unlike other girls belonging to this oldest profession in the world, Imtiaz Bibi has the pretensions of being a poetess of some substance. She has cleverly sidelines her poet husband and has taken away his audience. Her ego gets a boost from the large audience when she is described "like a star fallen into the well of courtyard from which we have come to fetch water" Anita Desai does not leave Bibi in a poor light. Her long letter to Deven reveals her class and the intensely private life she leads.

Anita Desai also touches upon the world of high-flying society ladies in her novels. In 'Cry, the Peacock,' Maya's mother-in-law is a social worker. Her concern for the poor is phoney and her social work is a ploy to keep herself busy and her loneliness in check.

In 'Voices in the city,' Sit's wife Sarla is a typical high-society lady. Such ladies come under severe criticism from Nirede: "What makes you go and trust society ^{ladies} ~~ladies~~? My mother used to be in Calcutta days and I would not trust her further than I am spit." As Desai's focus is on marriage and its allied problems, society ladies figure in her novels occasionally and do not get in-depth treatment. As products of society they reflect the ^{more} ~~moves~~ and attitudes prevalent in society at a ^{particular time} ~~contributed some~~.

Anita Desai has contributed some memorable characters to Indo-Anglian fiction. Her characters - though largely psychological - reveal a lot about life and reflect Desai's vision behind them. She does not present her view about life in a pedantic manner. Her protagonists are well etched-out characters. Some of ^{them} ~~whom~~ seem to carry the whole cosmos on their backs. Anita Desai has raised a number of topical issues of crucial social concern in her novels. The socio-psychological themes grow in her fictional landscape organically. They do not seem to be forced ⁱⁿ ~~on~~ the format of her narrative.

Anita Desai writes about sensitive women and their world of solitude, shadows and suffering. She does not feel content with the superficial depiction of her characters. She digs their past and establishes a connection between their present plight and their distant past.

Maya in 'Cry, the Peacock' is a neurotic and suffers from father-fixation. A host of her problems have their genesis in her over-protected days before marriage when she viewed life, people, and events from a fixed angle provided by her father. Her every desire in those days was fulfilled and a ^{rainbow} ~~rainbow~~ world of make-believe enveloped her life. Her marriage with Gautama shatters all visions of her childhood and stark realities of life stare her in face. This coupled with an ominous prophecy by an ^{albino} ~~alpine~~ completes the circle of doom around her. All her movements in relation to her husband. Gautama are guided by this sense of fatality. Maya's problems may be peculiar but the environment in which these problems take root is not entirely her creation. Gautama's inability to reach the core of Maya's heart and his supreme ~~at~~ indifference towards her are problems which agitate all sensitive married women. And Desai views and records life through such characters.

In 'Voices in the city,' the predicament of Nirode is the direct off shoot of the strained relationship her parents had. Her mother was a lover of music and things beautiful while father had nothing to do except "sleeping and drinking and idling." Nirode's eyes burn when he finds his mother in the company of Major Chadha in his imagination. Monisha commits suicide when the joint family atmosphere of her ^{in-laws'} ~~in-laws'~~ house proves too stifling for her. Monisha's

silent cries of anguish echo the pain of all similarly-placed housewives. Issues may be different but the underlying thread of loveliness and suffocation and lack of sympathy and understanding remains the same. In a situation like this, it may be tempting for a writer with a social concern to take sides, but Desai does not interfere in her novels by giving a sermon on an issue however topical it may be. Desai's approach towards the problems people face is different from the writers like ~~different~~ Mulk Raj Anand or Nayantara Sehgal who tend to be biased in their views. The social problems are important to Desai to the extent they help in exploring characters and their relationship with other characters.

In 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird', Desai presents the feminine ^{through} view point ~~the rough~~ Sarah who does not want her course of life guided or controlled even by her mother. When Adit asks her to understand mother's natural concern for Sarah and her unborn child, Sarah flares up and asks Adit not to behave like her mother: "Don't call me Sally! Don't you treat me the way she always does - as though I'm not an individual with my own life to lead, but just - just some appendage to them, with nothing but duties and responsibilities instead - instead of 'rights' ! If I were you, I'd be ashamed to listen to that nonsense for one moment."⁸¹ There is a trace of feminism in the dialogue but it has not been superimposed in the novels as a cover of women's

liberated movement; it seems to grow organically out of Sarah's strongly individualistic mindscape. This is the way Desai's characters feel as women and Desai herself projects her views point on women's issues in this fashion.

In 'where shall we go this summer? Desai skilfully paints an intensely powerful character of Sita who as an anguished middle-aged woman is caught in an unusual life situation. Though the novel focuses on Sita, her psyche and her trip down the year when "the island had been buried beneath her consciousness deliberately..." certain disturbing questions about social mores and attitudes *through* through the pages of the novel. Sita's dislike for the commonplace people described in the novel as "not an introvert, nor an extrovert - a middling kind of man" is patent and fits in with the pattern of her personality: "They are 'nothing' - nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals."⁸² Life is more than that according to Desai and her point of view is effectively put across through Sita.

In 'Fire on the Mountain,' there are memorable characters like Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. They, in their own way, are caught in the social web of their relationship. Nanda Kaul, the widowed great-grand mother, has not forgotten her late husband's life-long affair with Miss David when he was the vice-Chancellor of a University. "Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen - he had only done enough

to keep her quiet while he carried on a life-long affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a ^{Christian} ~~Christian~~, but whom he had loved, all his life loved."⁸³ In a passage like this Desai raises a topical social issue of illicit relationship outside the bond of marriage. Nanda Kaul's silent observation of this reality imparts a new dimension to her personality. Her weaving of a fantasy regarding her father and childhood is simply an exercise in escaping from social realities around her young days as also to wean away Raka from Ramlal who casts a spell on her with his stories of ghosts and 'Churails'.

Raka is a creature of instincts and her character is patterned on the "highly coloured" memories Anita Desai had about Kasauli as a child. In that phase of life, Desai could not partake in fun and games her brother and sisters had because she was in poor health. This forced-rest helped Desai to observe nature and its minute details from a close angle and this shows in this remarkable novel. The strained relationship of Raka's parents throws a dark shadow on her mind and provides a tell-tale commentary on marriage.

Anita Desai shows the powerful force of family ties in the character of Bim in 'Clear Light of Day'. Bim's tough exterior gives way to love and yearning for her brothers and sister as the novel reaches its ^{climax} ~~climax~~. Bim mellows

with the passage of time and her love flows for the whole family. "There could be no love more deep and full and wide than this, she knew. No other love had started so far back in time and had had so much time in which to grow and spread."⁸⁴ In fact, the way Bim feels towards her family, it appears Mira Masi has come back in her person. Like her overflowing love, Bim has ~~also the~~ has also the largeness of heart to admit that Raja, Baba and Tara "were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them, so that the anger and disappointment she felt in them was only the anger and disappointment she felt at herself. Whatever hurt they felt, she felt."⁸⁵ Bim's strong ties with her family are indicative of her desire of reaching out, and bury the gloomy past. Bim's reaching out is in tune with Desai's growing concern for wider issues and making new experiments 'Clear Light of Day' comes as a mile-stone in Desai's career as a novelist. Here she discards her obsession with marriage, its trauma and tragedy and shows her positive attitude ^{to} life. In 'The village by the Sea,' too, Desai's attitude shows further signs of mellowing.

In 'In custody,' Desai strikes a different note. Here her major characters are male and female characters play only a peripheral role. The theme of marriage also figures marginally in the novel. Deven is Desai's protagonist in this rather philosophical novel. This novel further reinforces the view that Desai is ^{chalking} ~~chalking~~ out new paths in her literary journey.

Anita Desai once told an interviewer about her views on society vis-a vis her writing. According to her she did n't think "society will ever be as interesting for me as the individual. To a novelist, it is always the individual who ~~is~~ is of primary interest and not the anonymous multitude, always the particular rather than the ^{general} ~~general~~." ⁸⁶ In all her eight novels published so far, Desai has stuck to her position but at the same time has painted society around her characters rather brilliantly without being conscious of it. She has added the element of nature in the texture of her novels to make her study of human life a rewarding and enriching experience. Her fiction incorporates characters touching a wide spectrum of society and a bewildering ^{array} ~~array~~ of fauna and flora ever seen in Indo - Anglian fiction. It is true that her primary concern is her character but it is only the half-truth. Her characters don't live in isolation; They are integral part of milieu around them.

The major attributes of Desai's characters — a strange kind of loveliness, their efforts to live in solitude with their conscience, to see hope where there are dead-ends and their dreams and despair — are reflected in the milieu around them. In a way, it is a two-way channel where dividing line is very thin, and hazy and dissolves easily.

Nature emerges as the invisible wire which connects her characters and their environment. Some significant signposts of their lives emerge when nature is at its brilliant or the worst. A kind of organic link seems to exist between Desai's protagonists and natural phenomena. A noteworthy thing about her characters is that they are the children of their circumstances. Anita Desai imparts her peculiar Indo-European sensibility to their responses to their environment. Her view of life comes out of this fusion. Anita Desai's world of fiction, there are problems galore but there are few exits or escape routes. In fact, her intention is not to provide any solution to the peculiar problems her characters face. And it is doubtful whether there can be any solution in such situations. Desai's effort in her fiction has been to locate the solitary spots in the interior landscape of her protagonists and how they influence their lives and people and environment around them. It can be stated without any shred of doubt that Desai has been fairly successful in achieving her aim within the parameters she has chalked out for herself.

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CHAPTER V

ANITA DESAI'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDO-ANGLIAN FICTION

Anita Desai has given a new thrust and direction to Indo-Anglian fiction. From 'Cry, The Peacock' (1963), which marked the commencement of a creative journey of immense promise, to 'In custody' (1984), Desai has provided some significant signposts in Indo-Anglian fiction by taking up hitherto unexplored areas of a woman's mental landscape. Her fictional characters in their various struggles, fantasies, unusual fates, dreams and disappointments seek to represent our times. Desai has imparted a unique Indo-European sensibility, her vision of life and time, her ^{cinematic} ~~cinematic~~ style and her extraordinary sense of details and images in evoking an atmosphere to her fiction. So it is no wonder that her work stands far ahead of her contemporaries in Indo-Anglian fiction. The prestigious 'Ladies Home Journal' of the USA has recently rated Anita Desai as one of the 100 most influential women in the world. She is the only woman novelist of India to figure in the list.

Desai's novels have a wafer-thin story-line. Much action of the narrative is enacted on the backstage of the mind as Desai's focus is not as much on problems as their impact on the sensitive minds of her characters. She prefers to go deep in "depth which is interesting, delving deeper and deeper in a character or scene, rather than going round about it."¹ The profound yearning of a wife

for an intense intimacy with her husband is a dominant theme running through women's lives. Desai portrays the dark world of shadows, silence and solitude which envelops such women because her protagonists have in their lot indifference and hostility rather than affection and tenderness. To explore the interior land of feminine psyche Desai focuses on women's individual responses to predicaments that define both the women and their social landscape.

Anita Desai's achievement lies in giving us the vignettes of the woman within who finds her centre hidden within herself. Her women characters are not of primary colours, black and white; they have shades and dimensions of a modern individual. But at the same time their activities are intuitive and convictions honed by instinct.

Maya's tragedy in 'Cry, the Peacock' is due to her biographical background plus her intensely sensitive responses to her environment. But at the core of her heart there was a yearning for a tender Gautama. Monisha in 'Voices in the City' speaks for all similarly-placed women when she thinks of "lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood..."² In 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird,' Sarah's quest is for "the real world - whether English or Indian, she did not care, she wanted only its sincerity, its truth."³

Sita's frustration, in 'where shall we go this summer?' is partly due to her conviction that men are "nothing but appetite and sex". In 'Fire on the Mountain', Nanda Kaul's yearning for solitude is so acute that she even resents the intrusion of Raka in her private world. Her deep-rooted loneliness seems to be the spillover of her late husband's life-long love affair with Miss David. In 'Clear Light of Day, Bim's sense of alienation deepens because her brother Raja ^{abdicates} ~~abdicates~~ responsibility and escapes to the green pastures of his in-laws in Hyderabad. But in her latest novel, 'In custody,' Desai's perception undergoes a dramatic change and " the change is towards a widening out of human concerns and a willingness to integrate concrete historical and specific cultural dimensions in the creation of interior landscapes"⁴ Though here, too, Deven and Sarla are seldom attuned to the same wave length.

Desai's diverse characters share a common perception of vision. Such a vision abruptly terminates the academic career of Suno in 'Studies in the Park.' He had seen in the park a Muslim woman whose face was " like a flower, wax-white and composed like a Persian Lily or a tobacco flower at night... and her head lay in the ^{cup} ~~top~~ of a very old man.... They never looked at anyone else, only at each other, with an expression that halted me. It was tender, loving, yes, but in an ^{inhuman} ~~human~~ way, so intense. Divine, I felt, or insane."⁵ In 'where shall we go this summer?' The enigmatic Sita has this remarkably - identical scene as 'only one happy

moment' in Bombay life;" I saw her face lying in those black - folds like a flower - a dead - white flower. Like a Persian Lily, or tobacco flower at night. She was young..... her head.... lay in the lap of an old man.... He looked down at her and caressed her face - so tenderly, so tenderly..... But the man and the woman never looked at anyone else, they looked at each other with such, such a strange, strange expression... Tender, loving, yes, but 'inhumanly' so..... I felt as if I were gazing at a painting, or seeing a vision.⁶

In 'Clear Light of Day' such a vision appears when Bim after shedding feelings of hurt and anger towards her parents, Raja and Tara comes near the sleeping Baba and feels inclined to lie down beside him: "Together they would form a whole that would be perfect and pure. She needed only to lie down and stretch out beside him to become whole and perfect."⁷

In 'In custody' such a vision of bliss comes when Deven reads the verse of Nur in his presence and feels that Nur "was a child; his child, whom he was ^{lulling} to sleep. He understood completely, in these minutes, how it must feel to be a mother, a woman. He had not known before such intimacy, such intense closeness as existed in that dark and shaded room."⁸

Desai's Indo-European sensibility is a great gift as a writer. And she has made full use of this family-given gift in exploring deep recesses of the women's mind.

Desai's characters and environment are Indian (exception being Sarah and her environment as in 'Bye-Bye, Blackbird'); but the way her characters respond to their milieu has shades of Desai's European connection in them. In 'Cry, The Peacock,' Gautama's sister, Nila wants to seek divorce. Her comment "After ten years with that rabbit I married, I've learnt to do everything myself," has the deep understones of a western feminist. And Gautama's retort, "..... the mess she (Nila) makes by being too bossy and self-willed and bullying" reflects his patent hatred for the Western conception. In 'Voices in the city,' Monisha's yearning. For silence and privacy also bears traces of European sensibility. Her love for books instead of saris looks some what alien in India. In 'Bye-Bye Blackbird,' Sarah's attitude is truly reflective of her European sensibility. Her decision to marry Adit, to seek 'an island independence' and her branding of sentimentality as "just weakness" are pointers in this direction, Sita's words that children mean "anxiety, concern, pessimism. Not happiness" and "what other women call happiness is just sentimentality" in 'Where shall we go this summer?' don't appear to come from an Indian woman's lips. Desai also uses her Indo-European sensibility in the delineation of Nanda Kaul's character in her highly acclaimed 'Fire on the Mountain.' In 'Clear Light of Day,' Bim is brave, intelligent and independent and is a touching meeting point of Desai's twin-faced sensibility. In 'The village by the Sea,'

Desai reveals her Indian ^{moodings} ~~moodings~~ in the way Hari feels his responsibility towards his sisters. He "must have a job if he was to find his sisters a way out of this dark, gloomy house and the illness and drunkenness and hopelessness that surrounded them like the shadows of the night."¹⁰ In 'In custody,' the character of Sarla has been sketched on the pattern of a typical Indian middle class family fed on films, ^{gossips} ~~gossips~~ and advertisements while Imtiaz Bibi's long letter to Deven reads like the catalogue of a feminist's grievances.

Indian women, unlike their western counterparts, have a limited experience of life. But this limited experience has the intensity of sharp insight and hawk-eyed observation. Desai has brilliantly used her gift ^{of} ~~keen~~ observation for minute details in depiction of a particular scene or character. Her use of powerful images, metaphors and lyrical prose provides her fiction a rare intensity -- which is a landmark in Indo - Anglian fiction.

In 'Cry, the Peacock,' Anita Desai paints a breathtaking scene with the use of some powerful images: "But there was a moon. A great moon of hot, beaten copper, of molten brass, livid and throbbing like a bloody human organ, a great full-bosomed woman.... pulsed and throbbed pulsed and glowed across the breathless sky."¹¹ In 'Voices in the city,' Desai takes a close look on the way the Bengali women dress and behave. Their saris are of

"the dullest colours, beige and fawn and off-white...." while their faces are "freshly baked bread" Monisha's cousin sports "white-coconut ^{smile} ~~smile~~" In 'Where shall we go this summer?' Desai finds Kankani dialect "as raw and harsh as wet fishing line" and an old woman's cataract is described as "lurking in one eye like a white fish." In 'Fire on the Mountain' Desai's eyes rove like a camera and shoot every ^{scene} ~~scene~~ in all its glory and intensity. There the sun "floated like a lighted balloon, making the pine needles glisten like silk, like floss" and the first breeze of late afternoon wafts in "swinging the curtain with a dancer's movement." The hills in the novel "were still sunlit, but the light was hazy and powdery." The Pasteur Institute ~~plung~~ ^{writhing} "writing" snakes of smoke into the sky." It is in such phrases that Desai's prose merges with her poetic sensibility. Such fusion of lyrical prose and poetic sensibility is something pioneering in Indo- Anglian Fiction. Desai sketches Ila Das with the eye of a cartoonist in the scene when the boys "hooted at her grey top-knot that wobbled on top of her head, at her spectacles that slipped down to the tip of her nose and were only prevented from falling off by an ancient purple ribbon looped over her ears...."12

Anita Desai has the uncanny ability of creating a scene in a pithy sentence. In 'Clear Light of Day,' a morning scene at Him's place is painted with a few

swift, broad, brush-strokes: "Bright morning sounds of activity came from them --a water tap running, a child crying, a cock crowing, a bicycle bell ringing..."¹³ As Bim's rage dissipates itself, Desai creates milieu around her graphically: "No afternoon in all that summer had been so quiet, so empty as the one Bim spent that day, lying as still as ^abone left on the sand by the river."¹⁴ In 'In custody,' Desai reveals the same class when she describes Murad as "of the betel-stained teeth, the toothbrush moustache, the fiddling, shifty, untrustworthy ways."¹⁵ In the same novel Deven is shocked when he finds his idol Nur in the centre of the company of 'lafangas' "like a serene white 'tika' on the forehead of a madman." The defused tension between Deven and Sarla is described as lying "in dead coils at his feet, exhausted." The inevitable hot summer day is also treated with minute observation. "The 'neem' trees along the street dropped, stricken, encased in dust. The horses between the shafts of the old tangas stood with their legs sloping under them, their necks swaying between their knees. Even the flies that adhered to their muzzles and flanks had ceased to buzz and crawl and appeared to be stuck on with glue."¹⁶

All great literature is a journey in time. In Anita Desai's fiction, time plays a significant role. According to Anita Desai, time "provides the invisible fourth dimension to existence and the effort of making it visible or tangible

has engaged writers through the centuries."¹⁷ Desai has attempted to capture time artistically in her writing. Time in her novels becomes elusive and assumes different shades and dimensions in different stages of life. She weaves the embroidery of fantasy and reality in her narrative in an attempt to bridge the void in time through the years. By cleverly using the technique of juxtaposing fantasy and reality, Desai ^{artistically} ~~artificially~~ distances events to provide a perspective in time. ^{The} ~~The~~ past in the form of a memory or fantasy and ^{the} ~~the~~ future in the shape of expectations make their presence felt in Desai's fiction.

In 'Cry, the Peacock,' the narrative constantly shuffles between the present and the past as Maya fights her agony and anguish of marriage and loneliness. In 'Voices in the city' also, the past is as painful as the present. In 'Bye-Bye Blackbird,' the past beckons Adit and he takes a bold decision to leave for his homeland. In 'Where shall we go this summer?' a tantalising pattern of past in the form of Sita's childhood and ^{the} ~~the~~ present in the form of Bombay life is structured. Sita in her distraught state of mind finds time "a scummy sea, telling nothing." In 'Fire on the Mountain' Desai composes a black and white framework of time as Nanda Kaul and Raka seek escape from ^{the} ~~the~~ past in their different ways. The wild, barrenness, grotesque and supernatural ~~cast~~ cast a spell around Raka as she wants to turn

away from the painful memories of her parents' married life and its trauma. Nanda Kaul seeks solace in the solitude of carignano as the memory of her late husband's illicit affair looms large in her consciousness. For Ila Das, her past, though short, is sweet while her present is a ^{nagging} nagging horror. Desai's concern for ^{finding} finding a pattern in time deepens in 'Clear Light of Day.' The novel records the changes wrought by time and what it does to people themselves and their relationship. Here, her focus is on time as a destroyer and and a preserver." 'Clear Light of Day' is a brilliant ^{Collage} collage of events and emotions characters and circumstances on the constantly ~~some~~ ~~roughing~~ ~~circumstances~~ swinging pendulum of time. Desai provides some touching reflections on what time is in relation to age in 'In custody:' "There was an age, after, all when the difference between sleep and waking became very faint and could be crossed at ease continually "18 Time comes to a full circle as Nur moves towards his ^{sunset} sunset days: "All one can resume, at my age, is the primordial sleep. I am going to curl up on my bed like a child in its mother's womb and I shall sleep, shall wait for sleep to come,"19 Time, once gone, does not come back. As Nanda Kaul weaves a fantasy to herself Raka, she philosophically observes: "One does not go back. No, one does not go back. One might just as well try to ^{become} become young again."20 Anita Desai's treatment of time in her writings is a milestone in Indo-Anglian fiction.

In her exploration of the 'inner' woman and tracing the fourth dimension time provides to life, Desai makes ample use of cinematic techniques. She employs close-ups, cross-cutting, freeze, flash back and slow-motion to unfold the drama enacted on the backstage of the woman's mind, their milieu and their relationships which flow, break and rejoin, with the passage of time. Her commentary on the social scene couched in lyrical prose and spectacular back-drop of nature with colourful details provides her novels a rhythmic movement.

Desai uses words like a magician. Her beautiful use of words with their natural sounds echoes long in memory. "Pia, pia" and "Mio, mio" - I die, I die" in 'Cry, the Peacock,' "gup-shup," 'yar', 'na', 'Chalo, Chalo,' Hato, Hato' in her other novels help in creating the local atmosphere. Desai's superb sound effect in use of words is significant in Indo-Anglian fiction; As Nanda Kaul in 'Fire on the Mountain' "paced the garden at twilight, the hem of her sari ~~shiding~~ ^{sliding} over the pebbles - Srr, Srr, Srr- like a silken snake,"²¹ The way frogs make sound is described graphically in the following sentence: "There was the big tank of rain water in which frogs plopped and rkk- rkk- rkked aloud under the pome-granate treed with their little tight scarlet pom-poms of bloom."²²

One of Anita Desai's significant contributions to Indo-Anglian fiction is her use of nature in her fiction. As mentioned in the last chapter, Desai is possibly the only Indian writer since Tagore who has used nature in such visual details. From 'Cry, the Peacock' to 'In custody,' Desai's fictional journey is through ^{lush} landscape of fauna and flora. No other writer in Indian writing has made use of so many words of flowers, plants and creepers in his work. There is a spectacular visual of the landscape, forests, hills, seas, summer, monsoon, dust storm in Desai's world of fiction. All come alive magically in her visuals.

Nature in Desai's fiction is not just a decorative appendage. It is as vibrant and living as her characters. As she writes the way a spider spins its web, nature dissolves in her narrative imperceptively and lives a life of its own. Nature in Desai's fiction is not just a powerful background which "could be touched, heard, and felt," it is a pointer towards a larger truth. Describing the landscape's place in her highly acclaimed 'Fire on the Mountain,' ^{Desai} significantly observes, "Surely that twisted pine tree with two branches like outflung arms against the sky had some meaning... the kite floating on currents of air through the gorges and silent chasms was symbol of some mystery that I could not understand, but invited me to delve into it and discover its significance, or at least ~~praise~~ proclaim its presence." ('Flight of Forms' : p 422 in the 'India International Centre Quarterly' Vol 10, Number 4, 1983).

Desai's use of fantasy in her novels is also something noteworthy in Indo-Anglian fiction. She uses it as an important narrative ploy in almost all her novels. In her first novel 'Cry, the Peacock,' fantasy culminates in bizarre events and in 'Voices in the city' it leads sensitive Monisha to suicide. In 'Fire on the Mountain,' Desai uses it as a thread which connects 'cricket-like' Raka to Ramial and Nanda Kaul. Nanda Kaul also uses it as a nostalgic journey down the memory lane.

In 'Clear Light of Day' fantasy has the rejuvenating force as Bim sheds her past inhibitions and assimilates family ties in her fold. In 'In custody,' Devan takes the road to fantasy to relieve his tedium of Mirpore as well as to taste the realm of romance and adventure typified by the world of Nur and his poetry.

Anita Desai's achievement lies in the way she telescopes fact and fantasy which are both parts of attempt to come to terms with a larger reality. Her characters lead a life of fantasy to come to terms with stark reality of life. Anita Desai makes us aware that we are living an inward life in addition to an outward life, and that only the two together make sense of life at all. Anita ^{Desai} she uses fantasy as a bridge between the two lives.

Anita Desai's interior kaleidoscope of her characters gains density because of the use of minute details. She reveals large truths in small details. As she told an interviewer, "One uses a particular moment to suggest a universal experience, a tiny detail to suggest a larger truth."²³ To cite an instance, Desai describes touchingly the way Bim and Tara in 'Clear Light of Day' loved the untouched Benares silk sari of Mira ~~Masi~~: "The girls fondled it, buried their faces in it, sniffed at its old, musky scent that they preferred to their mother's French ^{perfumes} ~~perfumes~~: it seemed more human. After all it contained Aunt Mira's past, and the might - have - been - future, as floating and elusive as the musk itself."²⁴ Such a passage echoes the noted film-maker, Satyajit Ray's views about minute details: "It is the presence of the essential thing in a very small detail, which one must catch in order to express the larger things. This is in Indian art, this is in Rajput miniatures, this is in the canes at Ajanta and Ellora, this is in the classics, in Kalidas, in 'Shakuntala,' in folk poetry and folk-singing. This is the essence."²⁵ Anita Desai's use of "the essential thing" in small details in her fiction places her in the front rank of Indo-Anglian writers.

Another contribution of Anita Desai to Indo-Anglian fiction is her creation of an uncamouflaged environment in her novels. Faulkner once said that environment is very important to a writer. And for Anita Desai it is the

Scaffold
material on which her sensitive themes are erected. A massive shadow of doom, anguish and loveliness hovers over most of Desai's novels. There are cobwebs of fantasy, reality, silence anguish and nostalgia. Desai explores the space between characters, their longing and muted expressions of despair. Her characters attempt to salvage their identity lost in the folds of their traditional roles. Their appeal is magnified because of the environment in which they breathe. As we cannot imagine Conrad without the seas, Kipling without the ^{British} Raj and R.K. Narayan without Malgudi, Desai cannot be imagined without her environment and characters.

Anita Desai's research for meaning in life is a recurring feature in her fiction. In her novels, she plumbs an interior world, a subterranean world beneath the actual and every day one. Desai's role in exploring social realities has escaped the attention of literary critics and social scientists. Anita Desai's achievement lies in focussing attention on the sacrifice and selflessness of the Indian Women despite several odds. It is true her protagonists do not share the image of Sita-Savitri types. They are sensitive, dignified, individualised and ^{conscious} conscious of their role in life and society while "always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness." Her characters of recent fiction like Bin and Lila have dignity and strength of character. Like the 'new' woman

emerging on the Indian social landscape, Desai's 'woman-within' is not ego-centric and is aware of her role as a person and *not* as a woman in a family or society. She does not view duty as a concept which leads itself to quibbling; it is a part of her lived-in-face that has learnt to adjust to shadows.

According to ^{Coleridge} ~~Coleridge~~ the great mind is androgynous--
"undivided and therefore fully, wholly creative and powerful."²⁶
Anita Desai's attempt in her fiction is to bring about fusion of the best in the male and the female mind. She had the same point in mind while addressing a seminar on Indian writing in English: "There is the 'ardhangini' (or English ~~Arhangini~~ ^{Ardhanarishwari} ~~Arhangini~~ ^{Ardhanarishwara}) figure of Hindu mythology that combines the male and female attributes with great grace and has inspired classical sculpture. Perhaps it is an ideal that could be borrowed by literature."²⁷ If her recent fiction is any guide, she is certainly on her way to make 'Ardhnarishwar' her ideal in her fiction. And that can well be her greatest contribution to Indo-Anglian fiction. Desai is trying to achieve her 'ideal' in her style of quivering sensitivity which she has made so entirely her own. Surely it is high time she attracted more critical attention herein India than she has been given so far; and that there should be a wider appreciation of the finely-tuned ~~turned~~ perceptions with which she dissects the Indian scene.

— The End —

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